The New Criterion

Special anniversary issue

September 1991

Volume 10, Number 1

$ 4.75

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

New York

20 East 79 Street
New York, NY 10021
Tel (212) 879-6606
Mon-Sat 9:30 to 5:30

David Smith

Works on Paper 1953 -1961
September 5 to October 5

A. R. Penck

Paintings 1982 -1990
September 5 to October 5

Beverly Hills

456 N. Camden Drive
Beverly Hills, CA 90210
Tel (213) 879-6606
Tues-Sat 10 to 6

Jack Bush

Paintings
September 4 to October 8

Berlin

214 Kurfürstendamm
1000 Berlin 15
Tel (030) 885-4251
Tues-Sat 10 to 6

Inaugural Group Exhibition

September 25 to October 26

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

October

DUANE MICHALS

November • December

NEW ABSTRACTION

Sidney Janis Gallery 110 W 57

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The New Criterion

Editor *Hilton Kramer*
Publisher *Samuel Lipman*
Managing Editor *Roger Kimball*
Poetry Editor *Robert Richman*
Assistant Managing Editor *Christopher Carduff*
Office Manager *Marjorie Danser*
Editorial Intern *Alexander Eaton*

Contributors to this issue

Stanislaw Baranczak's essays are collected in *Breathing Under Water* (Harvard).
Bruce Bawer is the author of *Diminishing Fictions* (Graywolf Press).
Christopher Carduff reviews books regularly for *The New Criterion*.
Joseph Epstein's *The Goldin Boys*, a collection of stories, is forthcoming from Norton.
David Fromkin's book about the making of the Middle East, *A Peace to End All Peace*, is now in paper from Avon.
Mary Stewart Hammond's *Out of Canaan*, her first book of poems, will be published by Norton in November.
Frank Johnson is Associate Editor of *The Sunday Telegraph* (London).
Roger Kimball's book, *Tenured Radicals*, is now in paper from HarperPerennial.
Brad Leithauser's latest collection of poems, *The Mail from Anywhere*, was published last fall by Knopf.
Samuel Lipman's latest book is *Arguing for Music, Arguing for Culture* (Godine).
Donald Lyons is the regular theater critic for *The New Criterion*.
Paul Mariani's *Salvage Operations: New & Selected Poems* has been published by Norton.
Frederick Morgan's *Poems: New & Selected* is published by the University of Illinois Press.
Jed Perl's new book is *Gallery Going*, an art chronicle (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich).
Robert Richman is the editor of *The Direction of Poetry*, published by Houghton Mifflin.
Christopher Ricks, the author of many books on poetry, teaches at Boston University.
John Simon's most recent book is *The Sheep from the Goats* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson).
Louis Simpson, a poet, has recently published his *Selected Prose* (Paragon House).
William Jay Smith, a prolific translator from the French, is this year's recipient of the French Academy's medal for service to the language.
James W. Tuttleton wrote about Kate Chopin for our April issue.
Karen Wilkin's latest book is a monograph on Kenneth Noland (Rizzoli).

Published monthly except July and August by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019, a nonprofit public foundation as described in Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue code, which solicits and accepts contributions from a wide range of sources, including public and private foundations, corporations, and the general public. ISSN 0734-0222. September 1991, Volume 10, Number 1. Subscriptions: $36 for one year, $65 for two. Second-class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster: send changes of address to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019.
Copyright © 1991 by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc.
U.S.A. newsstand distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., 1130 Cleveland Road, Sandusky, OH 44870. Available in microfilm from University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. All correspondence should be addressed to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. (212) 247-6980. Notice of nonreceipt must be sent to the Office Manager within three months of the issue date.
Advertising: Kate Shanley, 799 Broadway, Room 226, New York, NY 10003. (212) 477-4905.

The New Criterion is designed by Alvin and James Eisenman. It is set with the Flexicon Composer from Emerging Technology and is printed by Science Press of Ephrata, Pennsylvania.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Special anniversary issue

SEPTEMBER 1991: VOLUME 10, NUMBER 1

Notes & Comments: looking back on a decade, 1
Has success spoiled the art museum? *by Hilton Kramer*, 5
The culture of classical music today *by Samuel Lipman*, 13
The legacy of Friedrich Nietzsche *by Roger Kimball*, 28
Simon Schama, Francis Parkman, and the writing of history *by James W. Tuttleton*, 39
Literary life in the 1990s *by Bruce Bawer*, 53
Rimbaud, the anarchic demiurge *by John Simon*, 61
British intellectuals in the Thatcher era *by Frank Johnson*, 75
On the neglect of poetry in the United States *by Louis Simpson*, 81
The importance of T. E. Lawrence *by David Fromkin*, 86
Chamfort: an introduction *by Joseph Epstein*, 99
A footnote for Housman *by Brad Leithauser*, 109
Ad Reinhardt at MOMA *by Karen Wilkin*, 117
New poems *by Frederick Morgan, Paul Mariani & Mary Stewart Hammond*, 124

Theater: Euripides in Paris, Shakespeare in London *by Donald Lyons*, 131
Art: "The 1920s: Age of the Metropolis" *by Jed Perl*, 136
Books: *Robert Bernard Martin* Gerard Manley Hopkins *reviewed by Christopher Ricks*, 142; *Jacques Barzun* An essay on French verse *reviewed by William Jay Smith*, 145; *Paul Wilson, editor* Václav Havel: open letters *reviewed by Stanislaw Baranczak*, 152; **Shorter notices** *by Christopher Carduff & Robert Richman*, 158

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Photograph by Michael Koro

THE GAMBLE. 1968. Mixed media and collage on board. 22″ x 29-3/4″.

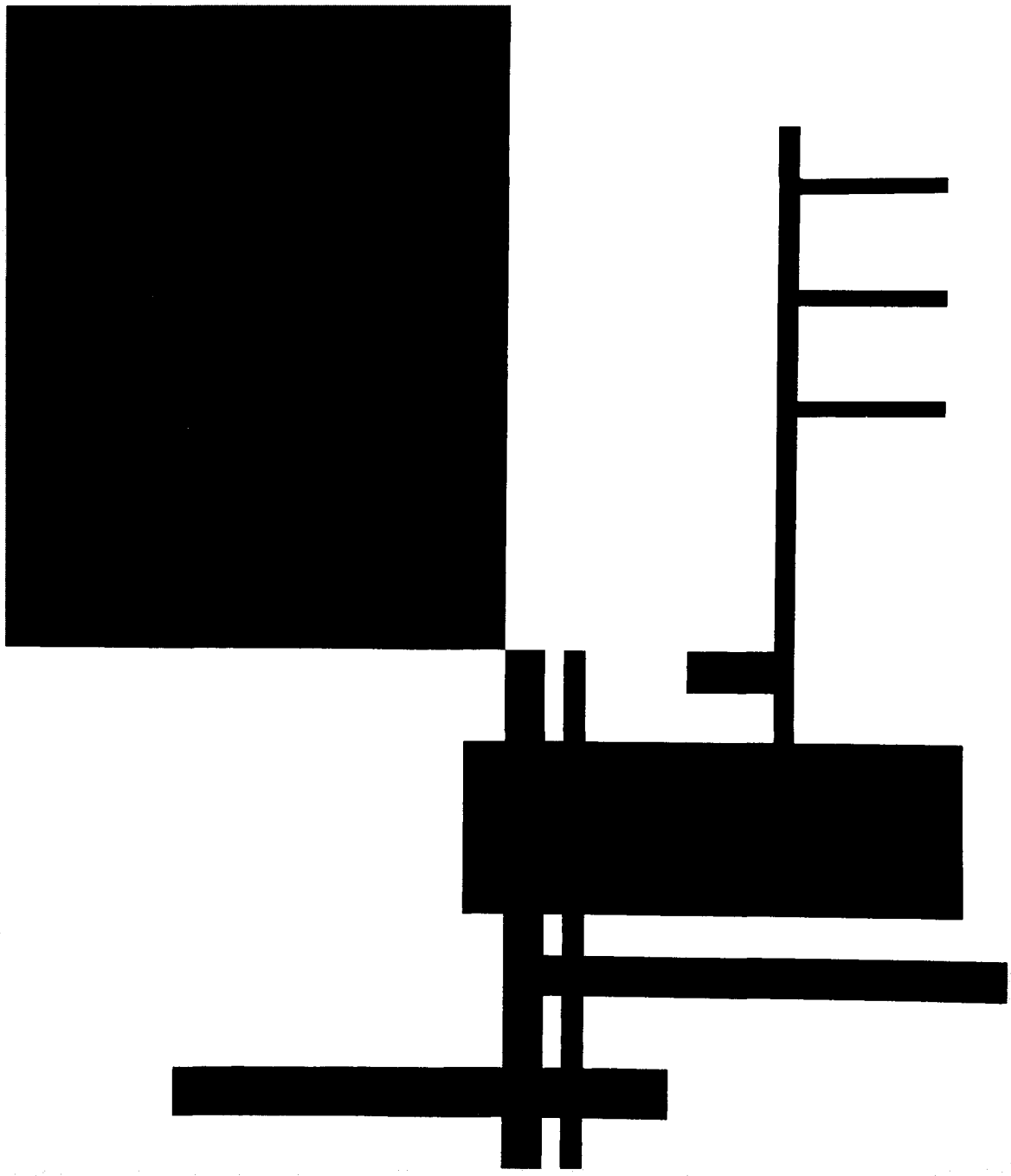
ROMARE BEARDEN:
THE HUMAN CONDITION

OCTOBER 3 TO OCTOBER 26, 1991

ACA GALLERIES

41 EAST 57TH STREET • 7TH FLOOR • NEW YORK, NY 10022 • 212-644-8300 • FACSIMILE 212-644-8306

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



#8-1951. Oil on masonite, 28″ × 24″ (71 × 60 cm)

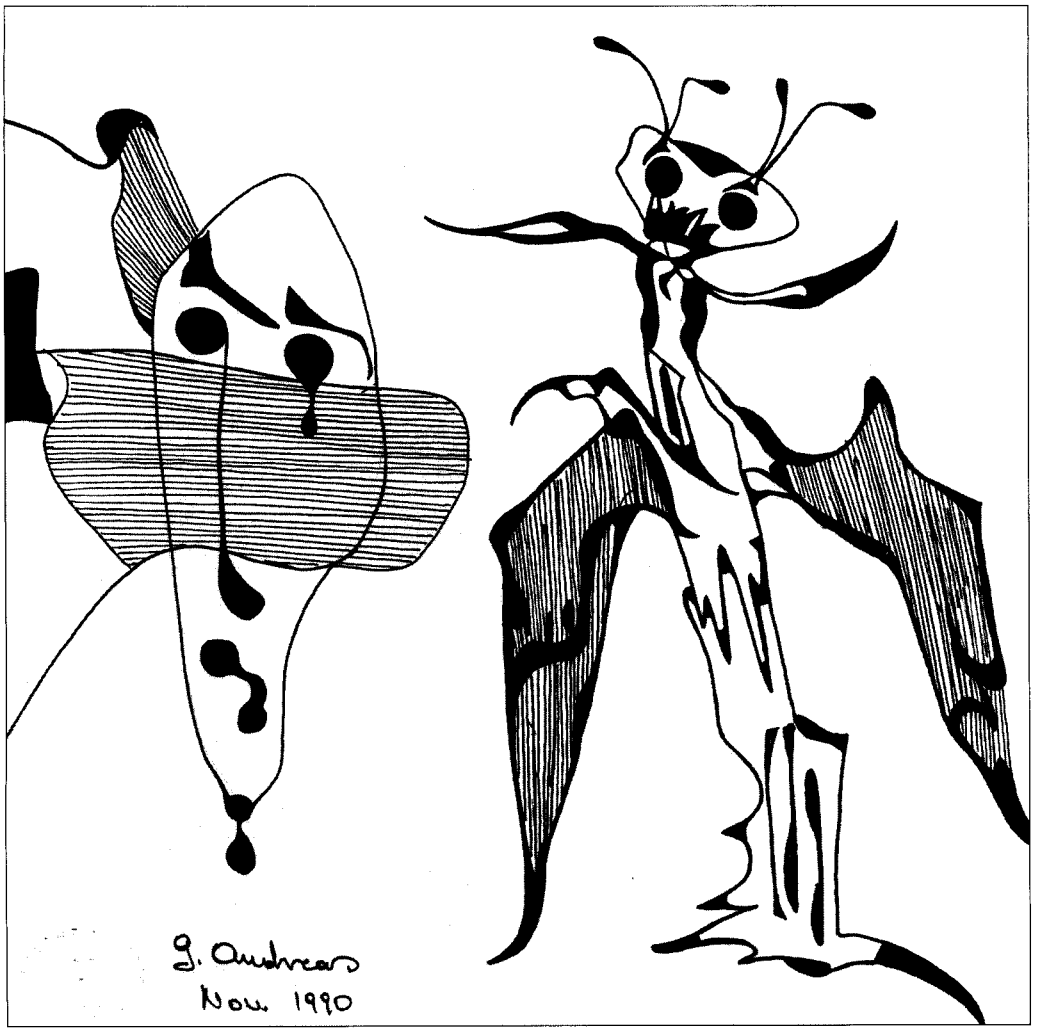
John McLaughlin

Selected Works: 1951–1972 · September 12 to October 12

André Emmerich Gallery

41 East 57th Street, New York 10022 Telephone (212) 752-0124 Fax (212) 371-7345

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



UNTITLED, 1990 — 7″×7″, India Ink on Paper

GEORGE ANDREAS

Paintings & Drawings

ANDREAS GALLERIES

8545 LEESBURG PIKE (Rte. 7)
VIENNA, VIRGINIA 22182
703-448-2222
FAX 703-356-3328

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

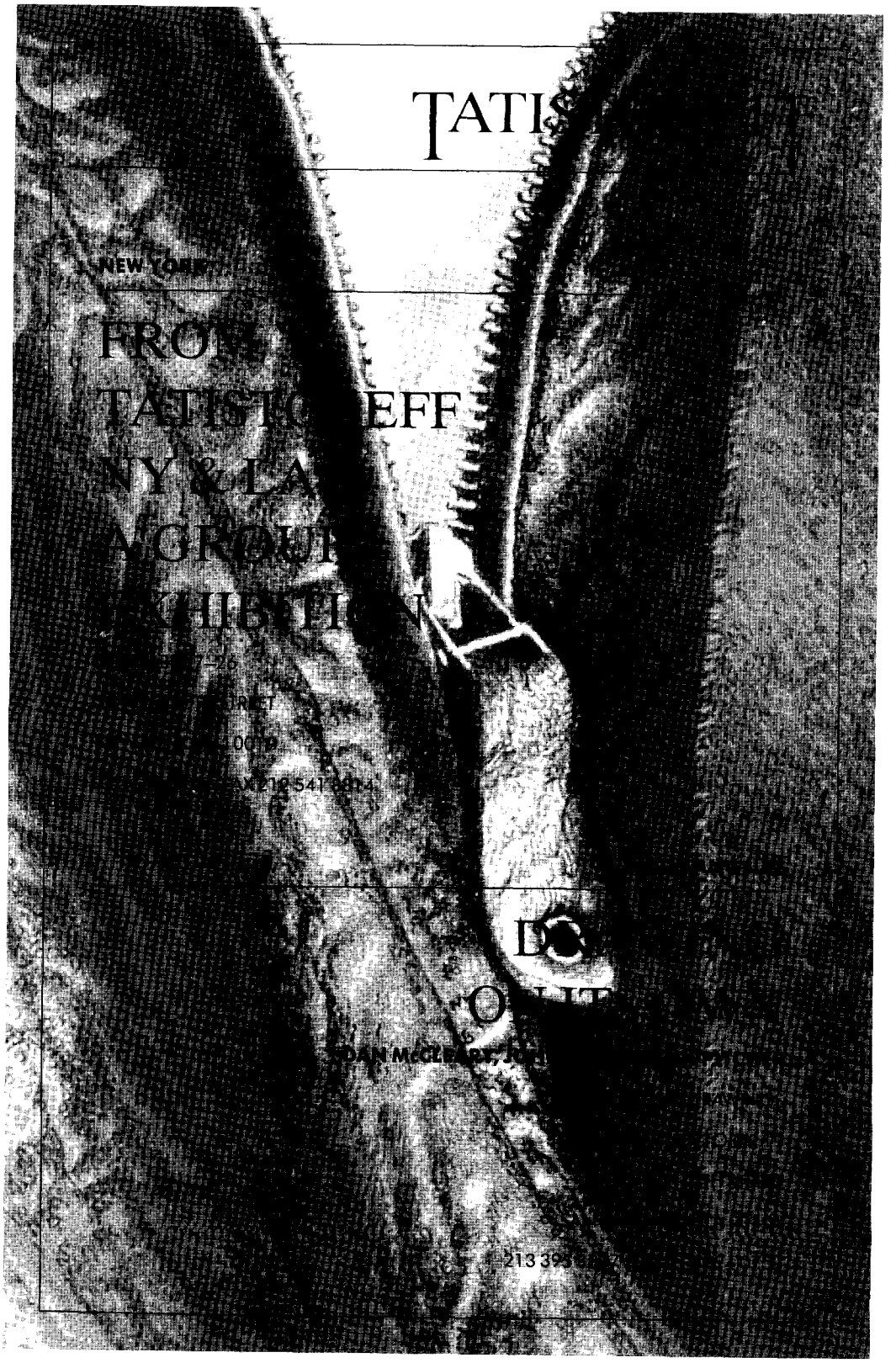
Arthur Dove (1880-1946), *Calf*, about 1911-12, pastel on linen or very fine canvas, 17¾ x 21½ inches

RICHARD YORK GALLERY

21 East 65th St., NY, NY 10021 212-772-9155 Fax: 212-288-0410

September Hours: Monday-Friday, 10-5:30

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Notes & Comments: September 1991

The counter-revolution abroad, the cultural revolution at home

With this month's issue, *The New Criterion* commences its tenth year of publication. It seems an appropriate moment in which to cast a glance over a decade that has witnessed historic changes of the greatest magnitude in culture and politics both at home and abroad, and this—in part, and with a focus on culture—is what we have set out to do in this Special Anniversary Issue.

In articles on a diverse range of subjects, from the fate that has overtaken the writing of history, the vicissitudes of literary life in America, the culture of classical music, and the conception of the art museum as a cultural institution, to the way certain figures from the past—among them, Nietzsche, Rimbaud, and T. E. Lawrence—continue to exert a significant influence on the present, we have made this an occasion to re-examine some of the major intellectual and cultural developments of this tumultuous period. In addition to these more or less topical articles, we are also including the usual number of essays, reviews, and poems that stand apart from the disfiguring conflicts that now beset our cultural and political life. This is the largest single issue of *The New Criterion* we have published, and we offer it to our readers as both a summary of what we have come to stand for in this embattled decade and as an earnest of our future endeavors.

In many respects, especially in political developments that have lately taken place abroad, this has been a thrilling decade. In the period that began with the election of Ronald Reagan and culminated in the Gulf War and its aftermath eleven years later, we have witnessed the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, the destruction of Communism's political and moral legitimacy in Western Europe for politicians and intellectuals as well as for the public, and its agonizing death throes in the Soviet Union itself. We have also seen the United States re-emerge as the beacon of freedom and hope for all of the oppressed people of the world. This fateful turn of history, which is as much an event in the moral life of civilization as it is a political victory against the power of totalitarian tyranny, occurred a lot sooner than most of us had any reason to expect. Yet it was not a quick or easy or painless victory for those on both sides of the Iron Curtain who had worked so long and so hard and sacrificed so much, which for many meant their lives, for such an outcome, while little dreaming that it would finally be achieved before the end of the century that had been dominated by the atrocious enemies of freedom.

In our euphoria over the death of Communism, moreover, it should also be remembered that this was what the difficult and divisive years of Cold War struggle had always been about. This was what the much maligned champions of the anti-Communist

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

crusade in the Western democracies had always sought to obtain with their pleas for adequate defense budgets, their uphill battles for an informed and intelligent foreign policy, and their steadfast resistance to the many ways in which our Communist adversaries had manipulated the intellectual and cultural life of the West to serve their own interests. For the Cold War was always as much a war of ideas as it was a contest for military superiority, and it was a war of ideas in which many talented people in the West —people of intellectual influence and great cultural renown—fought on the side of the political enemy. That, too, should not be forgotten in the wake of this costly and hard-won victory.

It will always be a mark of moral and intellectual dishonor for the West that in this historic and protracted encounter with the adversaries of freedom and democracy so many of our most gifted writers, artists, scientists, and intellectuals were more energetically engaged in opposing our own political institutions and the ideas essential to their survival than in questioning either the lethal political doctrines that were designed to destroy them or the elaborate edifice of cultural mendacity that was spawned by the Communist movement for the express purpose of bringing down the democratic societies of the West.

Indeed, it must never be forgotten that in the epic struggle between freedom and tyranny in the twentieth century, a large part of the intelligentsia in the West supported the interests of tyranny against the beleaguered defenders of democracy. Already some of the figures who loomed so large in the Cold War period—Jean-Paul Sartre, Bertolt Brecht, Graham Greene, and Bertrand Russell, among others, not to mention their less gifted but no less "committed" American counterparts—have begun to look permanently compromised and discredited because of the vocal and programmatic support they gave to some of the most despicable political regimes of our time, or indeed of any time. Future generations will—if we are lucky, anyway—marvel that it was not the Western defenders of Communist tyranny who suffered so conspicuously from censure and opprobrium in the Cold War period but those who took up the anti-Communist cause.

What keeps the memory of this vast moral forfeiture so painfully alive even today, in the face of Communism's historic debacle, is the dark legacy which this record of intellectual loyalty to anti-democratic ideologies has left us to grapple with in the last decade of this century.

How this political legacy will be negotiated in the Soviet Union, and whether it can be sufficiently neutralized for democratic institutions to take root in a society and in a culture that has little experience of them, remains a question not likely to be given a definitive answer for some years to come. All that we may be certain of is that the fall of Communism does not lead automatically to the triumph of democracy.

It is not only in societies newly emerging from the long night of totalitarian rule, however, that the legacy of intellectual loyalty to anti-democratic ideologies poses an immense threat to free institutions. The democratic societies of the West have proved in recent years to be acutely vulnerable to the insidious influence of this legacy, which in the United States has lately asserted its influence in the form of a virulent cultural revolution.

It is indeed one of the ghastly historical ironies of this last decade of the twentieth century that at the very moment when a counter-revolution of enormous force and consequence has been sweeping through Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the name of freedom and democracy, an anti-democratic cultural revolution of immense destructive effect has acquired in the United States so great a momentum and so large a measure of intellectual respectability that it has already taken possession of huge and crucial areas of our social, cultural, and intellec-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tual life, and is now well on its way to transforming the institutions of political life as well.

This is a cultural revolution that is now being fiercely waged in the classrooms of our schools and universities, in our arts institutions and in our mass media, in our private foundations and in all those agencies of government that directly impinge on social policy and cultural programming. It is a cultural revolution that has already resulted in an abridgment of free speech and the corruption of public debate, and as we recently saw in Senator Kennedy's ruthless and successful campaign to oppose the nomination of Professor Carol Iannone to a place on the National Council on the Humanities, its consequences are now making themselves felt in the highest levels of the Federal government.

In the course of the last decade this cultural revolution has acquired new labels and new agendas, of which the movement that goes by the name of "multiculturalism" is no doubt the most capacious and the most lethal, but the essential lineaments of this revolutionary impulse have been apparent for some years now, and so have been its disastrous effects on education, on the arts and humanities, and on the entire tenor of moral debate and political argument in our society. It is a cultural revolution that has succeeded in making race, gender, and class the touchstones governing every question that concerns the life and thought of the nation, which means that it has succeeded in undermining the very principles upon which our nation was founded.

It was in large part to address and to oppose the terrible consequences of this cultural revolution that *The New Criterion* was launched in 1982. It was our purpose from the outset to sound an alarm about the direction in which this revolution was heading while at the same time providing within the means available to us a critical forum where the life of high culture could be pursued without fear of the kind of political intimidation and intellectual coercion that were already well established, even then, in so many institutions of our cultural life. It was inevitable that we would be accused of exaggerating the threat that this cultural revolution had already made manifest, yet in retrospect it now seems to us that we woefully understated both the size of the threat and the scale of the destruction that had already occurred. In an editorial statement for our inaugural issue, we wrote as follows:

> A very large part of the reason for this sad state of affairs is, frankly, political. We are still living in the aftermath of the insidious assault on mind that was one of the most repulsive features of the radical movement of the Sixties. The cultural consequences of this leftward turn in our political life have been far graver than is commonly supposed. In everything from the writing of textbooks to the reviewing of trade books, from the introduction of kitsch into the museums to the decline of literacy in the schools to the corruption of scholarly research, the effect on the life of culture has been ongoing and catastrophic. Yet the subject is one that has scarcely been studied. It would probably take the combined talents of a Gibbon and a Tocqueville to tell the whole shabby story on the requisite scale, but one does not have to be a genius to recognize some of the more egregious results of this flight from intelligence and intellectual scruple. The cultural landscape is littered with its casualties and debris.

Yet if we compare these observations with the recent reflections of Paul Oskar Kristeller, one of our greatest living scholars in the humanities, we are in a position to measure the still greater losses our cultural and intellectual life has suffered in the course of a decade. In a lecture called "A Life of Learning" that was sponsored by the American Council of Learned Societies and published in the Summer 1991 issue of *The American Scholar*, Professor Kristeller spoke as follows about our current situation:

> We have witnessed what amounts to a cultural revolution, comparable to the one in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> China if not worse, and whereas the Chinese have to some extent overcome their cultural revolution, I see many signs that ours is getting worse all the time, and no indication that it will be overcome in the foreseeable future. One sign of our situation is the low level of our public and even of our academic discussions. The frequent disregard for facts or evidence, of rational discourse and arguments, and even of consistency, is appalling, and name-calling is often used as a substitute for a reasonable discussion. Every interest group demands immediate action in favor of its own goals and easily resorts to noisy demonstrations or even to violence. What we need is a careful examination of all pertinent facts and arguments, followed by a rational decision that may be a fair compromise between the groups and interests involved. Instead of recognizing that along with many problems that we cannot solve (at least at the present) there is a solid core of knowledge to which we should hold on and which should set a limit to our arbitrary thoughts and actions, we encounter a pervasive kind of skepticism or relativism that claims that any opinion is as good or justified as any other. Every statement made before the last five years or before the latest fad is considered hopelessly antiquated, and "traditional scholarship" has become a term of opprobrium.

And further:

> I do not know what the future will bring, and my expectations are rather grim, not only for our education and scholarship, but also for our economic, legal, and political future.

Professor Kristeller's reflections are all the more poignant and resonant when we recall that he is one of the most illustrious members of the generation of German scholars who came to this country to escape the consequences of an earlier cultural revolution —Hitler's.

It is also worth pointing out, as still another measure of our current situation, that the very organization which sponsored Professor Kristeller's lecture—the American Council of Learned Societies—had already joined in the attack on what he calls "traditional scholarship" by the time he came to give his lecture. The pamphlet published by the American Council in 1989 under the title *Speaking for the Humanities* is itself a doctrinaire defense of the intellectual practices so eloquently decried in this account of "A Life of Learning."

In the political upheavals of the Sixties, we were promised by the leaders of the radical intellectual Left a "long march through the institutions" that would revolutionize our culture and our society. With its unmistakably Maoist associations, this promise —or threat—of a "long march" that would sweep away the foundations of Western democratic society sounded at the time almost too extreme and too chilling to be taken entirely seriously, yet the radical Left has succeeded in mounting the cultural revolution it promised us, and its doctrines have now, a quarter of a century later, become institutionalized in the academy, in the arts, and in many other vital centers of our national life. As the counter-revolution proceeds abroad, the cultural revolution at home leaves us an intellectually crippled society, and it remains to be seen whether this ghastly historical irony will prove to be a permanent historical tragedy.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Has success spoiled the art museum?

by Hilton Kramer

Of all the institutions of high culture that have undergone significant change in recent decades, none has been more radically transformed than the art museum. In every aspect of its function, its atmosphere, and its scale of operations, in the character and number of the events that it encompasses, in the nature and size of the public it attracts, and in the role it plays in codifying—and at times deconstructing—our ideas about what art is, the museum has been so dramatically altered in our lifetime that in many important respects it can no longer be said to be the same institution we came to in our youth. And of all the changes that have overtaken the art museum in our time, the most crucial has been the elevation of change itself to the status of a governing principle.

In the past we looked to the art museum for our touchstones of artistic quality and achievement. It was in the museums that we learned to become connoisseurs of artistic accomplishment—to become intimate with and knowledgeable about works of art over the long term; to acquire a sense of judgment and discrimination about their special attributes, about their differences and resemblances, and their complex relation to each other and to ourselves. It was through this process that our pleasure in art was deepened and our understanding of it enlarged, and this was as true for the amateur public, which we are all a part of at the outset, as for the professional. "The Louvre," wrote Cézanne, "is the book in which we learn to read," and it was understood that learning of this sort could not be hurried by crash courses, superficial entertainments, or overnight conversions. Like all learning that is serious, that becomes a personal and permanent acquisition and thus a part of our lives, it required time and application, and one of its essential preconditions was a certain stability in the museum itself—the kind of stability that precludes precipitous change and a fickle, continual tampering with the objects of our scrutiny. We did not look to the art museum for news, but on the contrary, for what remained vital and enduring after it had ceased to be news.

Nowadays, however, we expect of our museums that they will be dynamic rather than stable, that they will no longer be guided by fixed standards or revered traditions, but just the reverse—that they will shed convention, defy precedent, and shatter established values as often and as eagerly as the most incendiary avant-gardist of yesteryear. We demand of our museums that they bring us news as regularly as the media itself, and this inevitably entails a shift of attention from the permanent to the temporary—a shift now everywhere in evidence in the museum world and officially codified in the name of the museum facility in Los Angeles that calls itself the Temporary Museum of Contemporary Art, or the Temporary Contemporary, as it is better known. It is thus one of the paradoxes of the art museum as a cultural force that as the reign

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the avant-garde has drawn to a close as far as the creation of new art is concerned, its program of incessant and omnivorous change has been enthusiastically embraced —some would say promiscuously embraced —by the institution that was long thought to be the principal counterweight to the restless avant-garde spirit.

The art museum thus finds itself at the end of the twentieth century in the curious position of having supplanted art itself as the leading advocate and agency of innovation in our artistic affairs. What was formerly a highly individualistic impulse has now become an established bureaucratic practice, and there can be no question but that the museum's adoption of this radical role has been accompanied and indeed accelerated by widespread approbation and applause. There are dissenting voices, of course, but if the command of money, resources, publicity, prestige, and sheer numbers of people is a measure of success in the life of an institution, then the transformation of the art museum into a vehicle of headlong cultural change must be pronounced a resounding success.

Yet, just as Braque once observed that in the making of art every acquisition involves an equivalent loss, it may be appropriate to ask what this huge success has cost us. While there is little likelihood that the momentum that has propelled our museums on their present course will soon be reversed, it nonetheless behooves us to see as clearly as we can where this course is taking us and what further sacrifices are to be exacted as the price of developments still to come. For certain sacrifices have already been made, as almost anyone whose experience of museums goes back a few decades will readily attest, and we may be sure that an institution that has so irreversibly tethered its fate to the princ ple of dynamic change will be called upon to make a good many more.

One thing is beyond dispute. As a result of the immense growth of museums and their embrace of the principle of dynamic change, more people than ever before have been induced to take some sort of interest in art, or induced at least to take an interest in matters that have the appearance of being somehow related to art. It must also be said that this new multitudinous public has access to a program of events, exhibitions, entertainments, publications, etc., far more various and far more numerous than any that was offered by museums in the past. Many of these activities are not, to be sure, what I have heard described by museum officials as "object-oriented." That is, they are not concentrated on specific art objects. But then, museums have long ceased to be places that people visited solely or primarily for the purpose of looking at works of art. They are now the venue of all sorts of other activities that can be described as museum activities only in the sense that they take place under the roof, or at least under the auspices, of the museum. Yet with serious artistic matters, with learning or intellectual improvement or aesthetic enlightenment of any sort, these activities often have little or nothing to do. They come under the general heading of social diversions.

We now take it for granted that the art museum is an appropriate place in which to order lunch or dinner, buy something to wear, do our Christmas shopping, see a movie, listen to a concert, attend a lecture on anything under the sun, possibly even art, and also on occasion participate in a wedding party, a cocktail party, a charity benefit, a business reception, a fashion show, or some other lavish social event for which the museum is deemed a suitably prestigious facility. In the museums that now offer such services and distractions, it is still possible, of course, for people to look at works of art, and many do. Yet except in the highly publicized special exhibitions that draw the crowds, the galleries containing works of art are likely to be emptier of visitors, even on weekends, than they were a generation ago. This is no doubt some consolation to the beleaguered connoisseur looking for a quiet corner in which to have an unimpeded view of a favorite masterwork, but it is not exactly a happy index of the museum's interest in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cultivating a loyal public for its greatest treasures. The overall atmosphere in our big museums, anyway, does not really lend itself to the cultivation of such a public, which cannot be expected to prosper in an environment of hubbub and hucksterism. In lieu of this public the museum now has members, who avail themselves of the social diversions and add to the hubbub without in any way constituting a serious public for art.

This development is no longer to be regarded as a peculiarly American phenomenon, by the way. We may have pioneered the move toward a broad diversification of the art museum's interests and functions, but the phenomenon itself is now widespread. When we enter the Louvre nowadays through the famous glass pyramid, we descend by escalator into a vast, bright, sprawling space that resembles, more than anything else, the interior of a huge international airport in the busy holiday season. There are lines everywhere—a line to enter the pyramid itself, and then more lines at the cloakroom, the washrooms, the ticket booth, and the cafeteria. (Except in the immediate vicinity of the famous tourist attractions—the Victory of Samothrace, the *Mona Lisa*, et al.—the crowd is considerably thinner in the galleries, where most of the art is.) And at this "new" Louvre or Grand Louvre, as it is now to be called, there is worse yet to come. According to an interview with Michel Laclotte, the director, "in the future, a shopping mall and a substantial underground parking lot will complete the new underground areas of the Louvre." We are assured that despite this vast expansion of the Louvre's functions and facilities, "in Michel Laclotte's mind, no concessions have been made to mere trends or fashions"—a statement which, if it means anything, can only mean that the director of the Grand Louvre is oblivious to what is going on under his own authority.[1] For at every turn in the labyrinthine sprawl of the new Louvre we are in the grip of every trend and fashion that has beset the art museum for several decades now.

Adding a huge underground shopping mall to the airport-like entrance to the new Louvre will have the virtue, I suppose, of carrying the logic of the new museology to its ultimate conclusion. Martin Filler, writing in a recent issue of the London *Times Literary Supplement*, gave us an excellent account of where this logic was heading even before the Grand Louvre was on the drawing boards. "I. M. Pei's East Building for the National Gallery of Art in Washington, completed in 1978," wrote Mr. Filler, "is dominated by a vast, glass-roofed atrium—replete with escalators and potted ficus trees that give it the aspect of an upmarket shopping mall—while the oddly shaped galleries relegated to three towers on the periphery of the central courtyard and the subterranean changing-exhibition spaces seem like grudging afterthoughts. Intentional or not, the architect's adaption of the imagery of the contemporary market place reinforces the notion of museum-going as yet another consumer activity."[2] In this respect, at least, it must be acknowledged that the French, albeit with some help from us—Mr. Pei is also, of course, the architect in charge of the Grand Louvre—have outdone even American efforts in this direction by uniting the shopping mall and the art museum in a single gargantuan facility. Alas, one is reminded that Andy Warhol's joke about the many things that department stores and museums have in common is turning out, as so many of Warhol's jokes have, to be a deadly prophecy.

It would be difficult to say whether this rampant commercialization and consumerization is only a symptom or a primary cause of the altered relationship that now obtains between the art museum and its public, but there can be no question that this relationship is now the main issue facing the art

1 See Raoul Ergmann's interview with Michel Laclotte in *The New Louvre: Complete Guide*, published by Connaissance des Arts in 1989.

2 "Money-changers in the Temple" by Martin Filler, in *The Times Literary Supplement* for July 19, 1991.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

museum as an institution. It determines much of its budget, its program, its choice of personnel, and its general ethos. To a larger extent than is commonly supposed, the museum has become a captive of its own success, and what is so striking now about its relation to its public is the extreme degree of anxiety and uncertainty that has come to characterize every aspect of it. Often the problem comes down to catering—in every sense—to a public that does not know exactly what it has come to the museum to do or see. This public wants, at one level or another, to be amused, instructed, gratified, edified, or otherwise diverted. Nowadays, too, with the toxin of multiculturalism threatening the intellectual integrity of arts institutions of every kind, the public may also come to the museum in search of political satisfaction. The experience of art is likely, in all too many cases, to be entirely peripheral to what is looked for in the museum.

With museum-going now separated in this way from a genuine interest in art—and by this I do not mean only a professional interest, for it is the amateurs of art who have traditionally constituted the true museum public—it was inevitable that the art museum would be obliged to devise new stratagems for attracting its public and retaining its loyalty. That these stratagems have, for the most part, less to do with education than with marketing is a reflection of the museum's low estimate of the public it has won for itself with such great effort. Hence the sometimes extreme measures that even great museums are driven to in their quest for the high attendance figures that are now needed to justify the expense of major events. When, a few years ago, I heard the radio commercials for the Caravaggio exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art—commercials that attempted to make the show sound as much as possible like an X-rated movie—I knew that we had entered a new period in the relation of the museum to its public. This was, after all, advertising aimed at the "educated" segments of the public, and it was not only the appeal to a prurient interest that was obnoxious. It was also the cynicism implicit in the whole endeavor, for the museum officials responsible for this advertising campaign surely knew that the exhibition they were touting in this unseemly manner was incapable of satisfying the kind of sexual curiosity the ads were designed to arouse. As a result, the art was demeaned, the public misled, and the institution degraded. This was not an isolated case, either. The same advertising strategy was used by the same museum to promote a showing of Balthus's paintings, too. In other words, a policy had been established to cope with a pressing need—the need to entice a public in whose artistic judgment the museum has no confidence whatever.

This low estimate of the public's interests and appetites, with its corollary reliance on marketing rather than education as a means of recruiting new constituencies, is even more vividly in evidence in the kinds of new museum architecture that have been created at such vast expense in recent decades. The field of museum architecture has in fact emerged in this period as a cultural battleground of considerable significance, for in the debates that the new museum architecture has prompted, as well as in the particular buildings it has produced, virtually all the most contentious issues concerning the future of high art in our democratic society have been broached, and in them we have been given a glimpse of the way these issues are likely to be resolved, or left even more conflicted and unresolved, for many years to come.

The first thing we notice about a great deal of the new museum architecture—and this is as true of the refurbished Los Angeles County Museum of Art as it is of the new Louvre or the East Building of the National Gallery in Washington—is that the palace-of-art, or temple-of-art, ambiance has been dramatically supplanted by the atmosphere of an emporium, a recreational facility, or a transportation center. This isn't the whole story of the new museum architecture, to be sure—the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Worth and the Picasso Museum in Paris afford a very different order of experience—but it is the largest part of the story, and the part most likely to be emulated in the future. The grandest of the new museum spaces tend to be allotted not to the contemplation of art objects but to the activity of the crowd—*as* a crowd. The debate that has attended the creation of the new museum architecture is, moreover, almost wholly shaped by this shift from an environment of reverence, as it may be called, to an atmosphere of activity and consumption. And while it is less a debate about the philosophy of art than about the philosophy of leisure, it nonetheless has grave implications for the place to be accorded high art in our culture.

Like all cultural questions these days, this debate about museum architecture also has an important political dimension. In the policy disputes governing the new museum architecture, no less than in other branches of the arts today, we have been witnessing the struggle—sometimes it seems as if it were the final struggle—between those who, on the one hand, believe that the future of our civilization depends on safeguarding the integrity of high art from the leveling imperatives of popular culture and populist politics, and those who, on the other hand, are dedicated to destroying—in the name of democracy and equality, of course—all sense of hierarchy and all distinctions of quality in the life of culture itself. The latter have been especially concerned to discredit the idea of the museum as a "temple" or "palace" of art, which in their view is not only an outmoded museological paradigm but a politically vicious one, and they argue in favor of the kind of design, the kind of program, and the kind of technology that will shatter forever the entire range of museum practices traditionally used to re-enforce the sense of hierarchy and the distinctions of quality they so intensely despise. Needless to say, connoisseurship at any level is dismissed as an interest identified with the odious elitism of the past. In the brave new world of the new museum—the populist museum, as it may be called—every interest, including a lack of interest in art, is to be on an equal footing with every other interest. The art object is thus to be denied its traditionally "privileged" place in the institution that was originally created to preserve and celebrate its existence.

The most respectable exponents of this populist museum model—Mr. Pei is, I suppose, the outstanding example among the architects—bear no grudge against art objects, of course, but they tend, all the same, to favor the kind of consumerist museum plan described by Martin Filler and so enthusiastically embraced by Michel Laclotte. But there is also a more radical faction in this debate that takes as its primary goal the downgrading—or, as they say, the desanctifying—of the art object in favor of technological simulacra that can now make images of the art object instantly accessible to ever larger numbers of people. Not the experience of art but the consumption of "information," not the ideal of high culture but the easy, ephemeral pastimes of entertainment, are what now, in this view, should be made the museum's top priority.

It is from this perspective—best described, perhaps, as that of a technocratic populism—that we have lately been given a glossy book called *The Museum Transformed*.[3] Its author is Douglas Davis, who was for many years a writer for *Newsweek*; its subtitle is "Design and Culture in the Post-Pompidou Age"; and its foreword is by Jack Lang, the French cultural minister, who is himself a champion of the technocratic populism Mr. Davis espouses. *The Museum Transformed* is, as an intellectual artifact, a perfect example itself of the way the appeal to fashionable consumption is nowadays combined with the denigration of the art object and the advocacy of radical cultural policy in discussions of museum matters. The format of the book is that of the upscale coffee-table picture book, with its many

3 *The Museum Transformed: Design and Culture in the Post-Pompidou Age*, by Douglas Davis; Abbeville Press, 240 pages, $55.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

color plates and its lavish use of decorative typography, yet in the nearly two hundred illustrations to be found in *The Museum Transformed*, which surveys a good many of the art museums that have been recently built or significantly altered, we are afforded very little sense of what it is like to look at works of art in these structures. You can turn many pages of this big book without having a glimpse of an art object, and this, I think, tells us most of what we need to know about the author's view of the museum's real function today. It is scarcely a surprise, then, that Mr. Davis's allegiance turns out to be clearly committed to what he calls the "post-object" role of the museum, which, owing to what he also calls the "post-contemporary condition" of our culture, is—or at least ought to be—in the happy position of dispensing with the traditional obligation to provide, as he says, "first-hand access to the sacred object."

While it may still be necessary for the museum to provide such access to the art object, it is Mr. Davis's view that "the evolving museum must see itself as a medium of information and pleasure." This, in any case, is the direction in which "the audience and the program of the museum" are said to be moving, and ought to be moving, and an institution that remains "committed to posing as the cathedral of the irreplaceable object" is merely pursuing a lost cause. Instead of a concern for what Mr. Davis calls "unique totems sanctified by scholars and historians"—one of the author's many sneering epithets for the accumulated aesthetic achievements of an entire civilization—museums are advised to look to technology and the theories of Walter Benjamin for proper guidance in these matters. Why should the actual art object matter, anyway, when technology has already rendered its physical presence obsolete? He thus invokes "the presentation of information about the world's authentic treasures, now easily recalled for our eyes and minds by electronic media or by holography, in media varying from the television set to the home computer . . . or to monitor terminals installed in the museum itself," and this development is acclaimed as the happy realization of Benjamin's theory of the desanctified art object.

> Long ago [Mr. Davis writes] the German critic Walter Benjamin prophesied that the mechanical reproduction of works of art through photography and film would diminish our insistence on confronting the "aura" of art only in its original state. . . . Now we have the means to "move" any treasure in a matter of seconds from the vault of the Louvre to a terminal in Columbus, Ohio, before a viewer conditioned by now to intuit the lost "aura" of a work of art in its duplicate state.

But is it really the "aura" of the work of art that we go to a museum to have an experience of, or is it something else, something far more concrete that cannot be experienced in "its duplicate state"? This refusal to make a distinction between aesthetic experience and what is now called "information" is central, of course, to this utopian—or should I say dystopian?—vision of the museum of the future. In his chapter on "The Museum in the Next Century," Mr. Davis writes:

> Because the possibilities for instantaneous transmission of visual and textual information are now almost limitless thanks to computer systems of instantaneous retrieval . . . each museum is now potentially every museum.

The awful thing is that Mr. Davis is by no means alone in believing in this chimera —nor alone, either, in his eagerness to see this museum of the future quickly and fully realized. Almost nothing that the new museum architects have so far produced for us comes close enough to the ideal he envisions. The Pompidou Center in Paris is the closest approximation, but its futuristic mission has been subverted, in Mr. Davis's view, by old-fashioned curators who persist in their benighted attachment to the art object and to devising sympathetic ways of exhibiting it—admittedly, an uphill task at the Pompidou Center. Certainly the art object is

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nowhere mentioned in Mr. Davis's evocation of what the "next" museum will ideally offer us:

> The grand staircase, the broad walkable corridors, the honeycombed asymmetrical galleries, and of course the elegant theaters and restaurants are the obvious interior elements that define the potential of the "next" museum. . . .

The curious thing is, except for the remaining presence of those "unique totems sanctified by scholars and historians," this sounds to me a lot like the museum buildings we have lately seen erected, but Mr. Davis is apparently the kind of purist who will not be satisfied until the museum is entirely object-free.

Is that day close at hand? I frankly doubt it. The art object is not going to be eliminated from the museum, but what is already upon us in the museum is an altered attitude toward the work of art. It is no longer trusted to speak for itself. It needs, so to say, to be brain-washed. It must now be seen to speak for, or about, something else. The way in which the art object is presented in the museum, the way in which it is interpreted, deconstructed, "contextualized," politicized, and otherwise de-aestheticized, reflects a loss of confidence on the part of museum professionals in art itself. It is also a reflection of the shift that has taken place in the academic study of art—the shift from connoisseurship to theories and methodologies derived from the social sciences. The immense influence of structuralist and post-structuralist theory has also played a crucial role in this trend among museum professionals to de-aestheticize the interpretation of art and treat the art object as if it were just another artifact in what is now called material culture. Aesthetic categories are now shunned in the museum in favor of sociological and political categories. The charge of "formalism" is now almost as dreaded in the museum world as it used to be in the Communist world. While militant Marxists remain a small minority among museum professionals, the Marxist notion of relegating art to the so-called "superstructure," where it is seen to be an embodiment of social and economic forces more profound than itself, has now become part of the conventional intellectual wisdom of a great many curators who have never read a line of Marx himself.

Often entire exhibitions are now organized on the basis of such ideas. The show called "The West as Art," which caused such a furor at the National Museum of American Art in Washington last season, was but one of many recent examples, and most of them cause no furor at all. And this changed attitude toward art is also beginning to be reflected in the way museums present their permanent collections to the public. This summer at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, for example, the seasonal "Selections from the Permanent Collection" exhibition was mounted under the title "American Life in American Art, 1950-1990," and it was billed as a survey of "postwar paintings and sculpture exploring themes from prosperity to critiques of the American Dream." When one ascended to the third floor of the museum to see what had been selected to represent this documentation of "prosperity" and "critiques of the American Dream," there were familiar paintings by Milton Avery, Richard Diebenkorn, and Lee Krasner, and sculptures by David Smith, among many other objects, that had nothing whatever to do with these subjects. I don't suppose that most visitors to the Whitney were even aware that these and the other works of art in the exhibition were intended by the museum staff to be "read" as social documentation and criticism. But that will change. With the announcement in July that Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, a left-wing stalwart of the *October* magazine circle, has been appointed to a position that makes him, in effect, the Whitney's chief political ideologist, you may be sure that we shall be seeing a good many more "critiques" of this sort far more aggressively pursued. According to David A. Ross, the new director of the Whitney, Mr. Buchloh "will have a key role

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in providing an environment that encourages critical study and theoretical inquiry into the practices, institutions and discourses that constitute the field of culture." This, you may be sure, sounds the death knell to whatever remained of a remnant of a serious and disinterested attitude toward art at the Whitney. From now on it will be more and more politics and less and less art, though the politics will be presented, of course, in the name of art.

And this political, anti-art course at the Whitney will be pursued in tandem with a revivified emphasis on consumerism at the museum. Mr. Ross's other big initiative this summer was the refurbishment of the Whitney's restaurant and the installation of a new chef. If you think that consumerism and political radicalism represent conflicting polarities in the new museum world, you are mistaken. Nowadays they live on very easy terms with each other, for each conforms to a fashion of the moment, and they are alike in diverting the museum from its real function. Neither contributes anything whatever to our understanding of art. That is what makes them so attractive to the new breed of museum director. You will see the same program of consumerism and left-wing ideology in command at the expanded Guggenheim Museum whenever its director gets around to reopening it. In the new museum there is no need to eliminate the art object. You may instead render it socially and intellectually invisible.

Of the art museum at the end of the twentieth century it may truly be said that nothing fails like success.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The culture of classical music today

by Samuel Lipman

Let me begin with the good news. Over the past decade, classical music—Western, dead-white-European-male music, if you will—has become more popular in America than ever. The evidence of this popularity is to be found everywhere. There are more composers, more performers, more new works being written, more new and old works being played, and more students studying to be performers. There are more symphony orchestras, more opera companies, more professional choruses, and more large music schools. Audiences for live concerts and operas have been steadily increasing for many years; it is also demonstrably true that the so-called CD revolution has resulted in the sale of extra millions of classical-music recordings to millions of music listeners both young and old. Along with all the purchases of CDs (and video cassettes and laser discs), of course, go sales of billions of dollars' worth of new and newer hi-fi hardware, some of which at least is used to play classical music. Nor can the extraordinary reach of opera broadcasts on public television, and on various cable channels too, be ignored; PBS broadcasts from the Metropolitan Opera are seen by millions of viewers in the United States, and now by millions abroad on their own government-run TV channels. Furthermore, the Met now has ambitious plans for gala pay-per-view television broadcasts, from which it is hoped that the company will draw large revenues. Even in the trend-conscious academy, the study of great music, not just as notes and sounds but as ideas and influences, has become the rage in all the most prestigious schools.

And then there is the pervasion of classical music as an integral part of the ambiance of our daily—and nightly—lives. What used to be derogated as elevator music has become *classical* elevator music; no visit to a pricey restaurant is complete without a sonic background of the *Four Seasons* of Vivaldi or any of several particularly familiar piano concertos of Mozart. Bach turns up frequently in television commercials, and has even been known to provide an accompaniment to scoreboard displays on televised baseball games. What is true in restaurants, TV commercials, and baseball games is equally true in department and specialty stores, and all manner of business offices.

Then too there are the commercial indicia of popularity. It may all be put crassly, but not inaccurately: never has more money been made from classical music by its practitioners, and out of music by those who arrange its commercial exposure. Performers' fees, like ticket prices, are very high. The most famous conductors earn in excess of $1,000,000 each year; it is not uncommon for guest conductors to earn well in excess of $20,000 for each week they conduct. The tenor Luciano Pavarotti, it is said, can command a fee of more than $100,000 for a single concert appearance, and a favorite instrumentalist like Itzhak Perlman can receive $35,000 or more for each of his con-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

certs. Columbia Artists Management, Inc., the largest arranger of classical concerts and media events in the world, seems a veritable paragon of year-to-year growth. Administrative salaries in the nonprofit organizations that solicit contributions from the public (as well as sell tickets) are high too: salaries of top orchestra managers (now called "Managing Directors") often reach, with benefits, perquisites, and expense accounts, levels well above $200,000 annually.

In recounting all the good news, it would hardly be fair to omit the fact that over the past two decades even large American corporations have flocked to supporting orchestras and opera companies, and have in many cases taken great pride in associating their good corporate names with musical culture. In an even larger way, senior business executives have been, and are today, willing to sit on musical boards and contribute their economic expertise to the running of these cultural enterprises. In general, contributions to music, not just from business but from foundations and private sources, have been going up, and even the present recession has not noticeably reduced these gifts.

I have just defined popularity in market terms. Large scale of activity, wide availability of product, increasing level of expenditures, existence of powerful institutions, stable base of support: all these testify to the kind of success that comes only from providing a lot of people with what a lot of people want. Viewed in this way, I can do no better than return to the statement with which I began—undoubtedly, classical music is more popular today than ever.

Should we then not rejoice? After all, something that is beautiful—by the most elevated criteria one of the enduring monuments of Western civilization—has become a part of the lives of countless people, filling their hours by beguiling their ears. Great music—and we can be in no doubt that, for example, Vivaldi, Bach, and Mozart are great music—has become diffused throughout much of American society and life. What more could music, and therefore those who love music, ask?

But if we go beyond this notion of popularity as an end in itself, and ask just *what* is now so popular about classical music, we begin to find bad news rather than good. What if we ask, not about the popularity of the constituent elements of music, but about the quality of their achievement and the health of their condition? What, in other words, if we attempt an artistic evaluation of the state of classical music today?

Perhaps the best place to start this evaluation is with new music. Here the situation is now, and has been for many years, in the highest degree hypertrophic: untold numbers of new works are indeed being written, and have been written, by untold numbers of composers. A remarkable percentage of these new works receive performances, and a remarkable percentage of the composers who write them manage to make a living out of pursuits—usually teaching—associated with composition. Alas, the result of all this activity, of all the grants for new music, of all the publicity surrounding its public performance, of all the passionate encomia new music receives not just as sound but even more as ideology, is—nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Merely describing the musical repertory—the pieces the best musicians want to play and the most musically committed audiences want to hear—says it all. The slightly less than 250 years from the rise of Bach to the end of World War II contains, with remarkably few exceptions, our entire musical repertory of choice. Even the exceptions—chiefly late Prokofiev and Shostakovich—now seem more than ever to have been fully rooted in the musical life of the earlier years of our century. Of the myriad of composers who have grown up since World War II, nothing remains but entries in our ever-larger musical encyclopedias, along with listings of compositions played once and, very likely, nevermore.

During this period of almost a half-century since 1945, there have been numerous highly touted developments in musical com-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

position. In these years, we have seen and heard total serialism—the extension of Arnold Schoenberg's twelve-tone method to all the parameters of music, including duration, dynamics, and timbre; compositions full of screeches, whistles, and roars, produced and reproduced on magnetic tape; chance music, in which the performer was called upon to be the composer as well; conceptual music (a close relative of chance music), in which written instructions for performance replaced any notes at all; the use of oriental chanting and instruments; minimalism, in which the ceaseless repetition of simple chords and rhythms served to produce works of extreme length and utter boredom; and most recently, I suppose, neo-romanticism, the notion that anytime a composer said, "Let there be melody and harmony," lo, there was melody and harmony. The most famous names among the protagonists of these compositional schools have been such stars as Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez, John Cage, Philip Glass, and now John Adams; so far as their compositions are concerned, all their reputations, and all their long-lived careers, have not sufficed to put a single one of their works into the repertory of mainstream classical music.

Sadly, so complete has been the failure of all these new compositions that they have dragged down with them one of the true bright spots of twentieth-century music—American compositions of the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s. The objections of both musicians and audiences to the prevailingly amelodic and perversely dissonantal characteristics of the European music of the post-World War II period—and of the American music from the mid-1950s on written under this European influence—have placed even the great achievements of (to name only a few) the Americans Roy Harris, Samuel Barber, Howard Hanson, Walter Piston, William Schuman, and David Diamond under the cloud of what is derisorily called "modern music." The only exception to this summary rejection of American music has been Aaron Copland, and even his position in the repertory now seems ever more exclusively based on his easy-to-take ballet scores, rather than on his concert music. And what is true of these well-known American composers whose work is now in a condition of desuetude is vastly more true of such immensely gifted later composers as (again to name only two) Andrew Imbrie and William Bergsma.

A special word is in order for the condition of new opera. Here, in this most problematic and expensive of musical forms, there have been two "stars" since World War II: the English Benjamin Britten and the American Philip Glass. Yet Britten's two most successful works, *Peter Grimes* (1945) and *Billy Budd* (1951), go back at least forty years; none of his later works, very much including *Death in Venice* (1973), has been anything more than a *succès d'estime*. In the case of Glass's several works, only *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), his collaboration with the director/designer Robert Wilson, has managed to stick in the memory, vastly more for Wilson's staging than for Glass's music. Elsewhere with Glass, the Gandhi pageant *Satyagraha* (1980) and the incredibly static *Akhnaten* (1984) seemed more like *tableaux mortes* than flesh-and-blood operas. The current hotshot, of course, is John Adams, whose *Nixon in China* (1987), a collaboration with the avant-garde director Peter Sellars, appealed to an audience of "cutting-edge" dance and theater types; as always with trendy new music, the missing element in the audience was music lovers.

Though new operas are commissioned and usually performed by the company doing the commissioning, by far the largest number of opera companies in this country—including the giant of them all, the Metropolitan Opera—concentrate their efforts on the standard works by the same few composers that have always made up their repertories. The winners, now as before, are the most-celebrated operas of Mozart, Verdi, and Puccini, and, of course, "*Cav* and *Pag*"—*Cavalleria rusticana* and *Pagliacci*. The way these winners are sold, by small

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

opera company after small opera company, is vulgar in the extreme: every opera, whatever its particular plot and mood, is described as an exciting story of love and intrigue, guaranteed to keep the audience at the edge of their seats.

From composers and their compositions, it is but a short jump to performers. Here a sharp distinction must be drawn between Americans and Europeans. Early in his career, it seemed that the meteoric rise of Leonard Bernstein would pave the way for a new generation of American masters of the baton. But despite the existence of Bernstein as a role model, the number of American conductors leading major American orchestras remains vanishingly small: David Zinman in Baltimore, Leonard Slatkin in Saint Louis, Gerard Schwarz in Seattle, and, in opera, James Levine at the Metropolitan. Elsewhere, the list of conductors, in place or appointed, is totally European (or, in one case, Asian): New York (Kurt Masur), Boston (Seiji Ozawa), Philadelphia (Wolfgang Sawallisch), Cleveland (Christoph von Dohnányi), Chicago (Daniel Barenboim), Los Angeles (Esa-Pekka Salonen), and Washington (Mstislav Rostropovich). In San Francisco, the American-born Herbert Blomstedt is entirely a product of European musical life, and in Pittsburgh Lorin Maazel, though trained in this country, made his initial conducting reputation entirely abroad.

At least in our best orchestras, symphony musicians are now remarkably well paid; in these major ensembles, annual incomes of more than $50,000 (with benefits extra), and with substantially more for solo players, are the rule rather than the exception. And yet there is everywhere a feeling of discontent with the orchestral player's lot. Conductors are in general not highly respected; management is often seen as the enemy, plotting to get more work out of the musicians, with diminished job security and worsened working conditions. Though orchestra players now live well, their job satisfactions seem low. They resent the routinized nature of their tasks, and they have little feeling that they are making great music. One telling sign of their discontent is the small amount of time the finest orchestral players now give to the study and playing of great chamber music—not for money, but for their own pleasure. All in all, membership in an orchestra is now seen as a dead-end street—a well-paid job, to be sure, but a dead-end anyway.

Among singers, the story is rather more encouraging. Since the nineteenth century, American vocal artists have found it possible to make national and even international careers; one thinks of such past greats as Rosa Ponselle, Lawrence Tibbett, Richard Crooks, Richard Tucker, and Leonard Warren. In recent years, one thinks immediately of Leontyne Price, Sherrill Milnes, Samuel Ramey, and now Thomas Hampson. Less famous American singers are busy, and actually much in demand. But despite their justified successes, it cannot be said that any American singer since World War II has placed a personal stamp on any single role in a standard European opera, let alone on any great opera composer's oeuvre. Whether one thinks of Verdi or Puccini or Wagner, the commanding interpretations—the interpretations in which the singers place their mark on our perception of the characters they portray—remain those accomplished by such European singers of the fairly recent past as (again to name only a few) Maria Callas, Tito Gobbi, Hans Hotter, and Elisabeth Schwarzkopf.

Our instrumentalists have hardly fared so well as our singers. Our only analogue to Leonard Bernstein in his role as a conductor has been the pianist Van Cliburn. This once-young Texan, trained entirely in this country, rocketed to stardom with his unexpected victory in the 1958 Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow; by this triumph he inherited the mantle of the leader of the American school of piano playing from the tragically short-lived William Kapell, who had perished in an airplane crash in 1953. But it was already unsettling that the chief critical praise lavished on Cliburn emphasized not how he sounded like an American pianist—steely fingered,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sharp-rhythmed, and clangorous in tone—but how his playing was a throwback to an older European style, riper, richer, and more romantic, i.e., less materialistic. But Cliburn's great start quickly took him in the direction of becoming a popular entertainer, of no influence over his fellow pianists and other musicians. And since Cliburn, only Murray Perahia among American pianists has made a truly important international career—and Perahia's career is almost entirely the result of his long residence in London.

Among string players in America, the great names that came forward in the 1960s and 1970s were the Israeli violinists Itzhak Perlman and Pinchas Zukerman; though both are American residents and trained here, they seem additions to American musical life rather than constituents of it. Much the same can be said of the Japanese violinist Midori, a successful concert artist before her teens and now, about twenty years old, seemingly at the top of her career. Of the most successful string players now in this country, only the American cellist of Chinese parentage, Yo-Yo Ma, seems a truly functioning part of our musical life.

For many years, American music lovers were justly proud of their great orchestras. In the 1920s and 1930s, Leopold Stokowski's Philadelphia Orchestra and Serge Koussevitzky's Boston Symphony Orchestra were of world-class stature; in the first half of the 1930s, the same could be said of Arturo Toscanini's New York Philharmonic and then, a bit later, of Toscanini's NBC Symphony. Though the Philadelphia retained much of its beautiful sound under Stokowski's successor, Eugene Ormandy, much of the musical excitement engendered by Stokowski was soon dissipated; the Boston Symphony's unique combination of brilliance and depth of sonority did not survive Koussevitzky's supercession by Charles Munch in the 1940s. Only George Szell's Cleveland Orchestra of the 1950s and 1960s joined the class of immortals, and indeed to date it has been the last American orchestra to do so.

As a whole, American orchestral life over the past two or three decades, and very much continuing into the present, has been a sad story of a rough-hewn efficiency in performance, achieved at the cost of tonal refinement, ensemble precision, individual character, and musical vitality. Zubin Mehta's long tenure at the Philharmonic, now fortunately concluded, seemed disastrous in its coarseness and vulgarity, both for the orchestra itself and for the Philharmonic's core audience. The Philadelphia, under Riccardo Muti during the 1980s, almost completely lost its hitherto jealously guarded tonal profile. The Boston Symphony, giving one routine performance after another, has ceased to be a factor on the international scene, despite its supposedly charismatic leader, Seiji Ozawa. Of the greatest American orchestras of the past, only the Cleveland under Christoph von Dohnányi manages to sustain a deserved reputation for interesting programs played in an interesting manner.

In the world of opera, I can only speak of the Metropolitan and the New York City Opera. In this age of the cheap American dollar, the Metropolitan is now a prime tourist attraction. Many, if not most, performances are sold out, and good seats for any performance, at whatever price, are hard to come by. Its shop and mail-order sales are booming, and the Met's house magazine, *Opera News*, now under the strong editorship of Patrick Smith, has no less than 120,000 subscribers. Furthermore, with the excellent players Levine has brought in, the Met orchestra has become under his training a force to be reckoned with not only in the opera house but as a distinctive ensemble ranking with the best orchestras in the world today. The result of this new-found power of the Met has been a spate of artificial-sounding Met opera recordings, conducted by Levine, appearing on the German Deutsche Grammophon and the Japanese Sony Classical labels. Because of its ability to record, the Met is able to engage on a long-term basis the most successful singers in the world, including Luciano Pavarotti and Placido

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Domingo. But all this activity and prosperity cannot hide the fact that the Met's performances are in large measure undistinguished vocally, without any permanently redeeming value provided by the Met's growing indulgence in gargantuan and costly new productions. Although Levine insists on conducting the most important works and new productions himself, the level of conducting on most non-Levine nights at the Met—despite an occasional visit from someone like Carlos Kleiber—is remarkably uninteresting. When Levine is on the podium, his conducting often seems narrowly self-indulgent: for example, his infatuation with slow tempos went far to destroy the Met's *Ring* cycle of the past several years. Though the Met will indeed be doing a very few new works in the coming seasons, the rules of safety and sameness in repertory, direction, and performance all combine to make the Met a dull, albeit deluxe, company. And as serious listening to the weekly Met radio broadcasts proves, even safety and sameness cannot guarantee minimally acceptable performances in terms of security of intonation and solidity of vocal production.

By contrast, the New York City Opera now gives the impression of fighting for its life. Left in uncertain artistic condition by Beverly Sills when she turned the company's general directorship over to conductor Christopher Keene, the City Opera is saddled with the New York State Theater, an inconvenient and accoustically unattractive place in which to perform opera. Its long-term financial problems, which had some years ago forced a serious rearrangement in the dates of its seasons, have hardly been eased by Beverly Sills's triumphant entry onto the Metropolitan Opera board; here, her main task will likely be fund raising for the Met, but not for the New York City Opera, the company which so many years ago gave her operatic birth and for so many years sustained her career. City Opera performances, despite the best efforts of Christopher Keene and a host of other dedicated people, remain very much in the shadow of the Met's vaunted opulence. The City Opera's recent ventures into new opera—one thinks immediately of Anthony Davis's *X*, Dominick Argento's *Casanova*, and Jay Reise's *Rasputin*—have hardly borne fruit. Of all the City Opera initiatives in the past few years, only one—but a big one it was—seemed to make its proper mark: the strikingly well-received production in the fall of 1990 of Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*, a central work of pre-World War II modernism that the Met should have done long ago but has sedulously avoided these many years.

For some years now, all these signs of decline in American musical (and operatic) life have been quite clear to all but those optimistic souls who make their meager livings by praise. The answer to this negative perception has been—in addition to various attempts by powerful arts advocates and *apparatchki* to kill the messengers—to concentrate attention on supposedly authentic modes of performance. Through this device, it was hoped that two inconvenient and highly disturbing facets of contemporary musical life might be elided and thus obscured: the lack of new music and the lack of interesting new performers.

This new way of performing old music has drawn sustenance—inspiration seems too honorific a term—from the rediscovery of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century composition so characteristic of our own century. This unearthing of past musical treasures was important, under the name of neoclassicism, for the creative efforts of such estimable composers as Igor Stravinsky and Richard Strauss. At the hands of such distinctive personalities as the English old-instrument-builder and theorist Arnold Dolmetsch and the magnificent harpsichordist Wanda Landowska, this reclamation unearthed a forgotten genre of masterpieces, and thus enriched our musical vocabulary and sensibility; even the poet Ezra Pound and his friend the violinist Olga Rudge, through their work on behalf of the music of Vivaldi, deserve credit for some of this achievement.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But what started as an artistic crusade by immensely gifted individuals had become, by the 1950s, what might be called the "Business of Baroque"; what increasingly seemed to count was not the quality of the music being rediscovered and performed, or the distinction of the way it was being performed, but rather the worship of musical quaintness and the cultivation of stylistic difference for its own sake. By the 1960s, it had become unfashionable in intellectual circles to play Bach on the piano; even Glenn Gould's marvelous recorded performances of Bach were chiefly admired for how little the instrument he played sounded, at his hands, like a flesh-and-blood piano.

The 1970s and the 1980s saw the growth in England of orchestra-sized ensembles dedicated to playing not just Bach on period instruments and in period style but Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. At first the leader in this pursuit was the very drab and unexciting Christopher Hogwood, leading a pick-up group appropriately called the Academy of Ancient Music. Soon Hogwood was succeeded by the rather more sparky Roger Norrington, leading yet another pick-up group labeled the London Classical Players, and making a great impression, at least on the critics, with fast, light, and inflexible performances of all the Beethoven symphonies. Everywhere there were cries that this was Beethoven as Beethoven heard his own music: so applauded was Norrington's approach that he even applied his talents to the *Symphonie fantastique* of Berlioz. But as the *réclame* settled, as by now it most certainly has, Norrington's performances stood revealed as made up of equal parts scrawny and out-of-tune strings and pinched and aggressive winds and brass. In New York, an important sign of the times was the abysmal failure both with public and press in its initial season of the Classical Band, our own version of the authentic-performance phenomenon led by the English baroque specialist Trevor Pinnock.

The ups, and perhaps now downs, of the movement to play old music in such a way as to make it sound new-old, have not been without their influence on the academic study of musicology. On the one hand, the professoriate has leapt into the study of (to use Hogwood's appellation) "ancient music." Theses, dissertations, and published articles and treatises on proper performance style of music written before 1775 or thereabouts have been pouring out of the educational mill. Furthermore, this concern with how the music written around and before the time of Bach and his sons should be performed has moved forward into the nineteenth century. Not just Mozart but Beethoven, too, has become fair game for musicology. In particular, a thriving scholarly industry has been established in the study of Beethoven's sketchbooks; in this study, particular attention is given to the use of watermark analysis to date the paper on which these sketches were written, and thus to establish the chronological order of the sketches in order to reveal the process of composition. Now all the analytic techniques of musicology are being applied to later music, in particular to Chopin, who has gone in intellectual estimation in only a few decades from rejection as a vapid salon composer to acceptance as the worthy subject of rigorous scholarly-musical analysis. Similarly, a new Verdi edition, closely associated with the musicologist Philip Gossett of the University of Chicago, is laying claim to the establishment of a truly scholarly text, and a proper style of performance, for these core operas of the Italian romantic tradition.

But there is much more going on now in academic musicology than the mere study of how notes should be played and sung. Musicology has become very much a part of semiotics, with such words as "signifier" and "signified" liberally strewn over the newest studies of famous composers. Furthermore, the new rage in musicology is called cultural studies—the placing of music squarely in the politics and sociology of its creation and the condition under which it became available to the public. Taking over from what used to be called the sociology of knowledge, these new musicologists are not content with dis-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cussing the origins of great works of music in their own terms, but go beyond what composers thought they were writing, musicians thought they were performing, and audiences thought they were hearing—and, especially, what patrons thought they were supporting—to see the past of this art in the light of radical contemporary notions of economics and gender.

Thus in *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance, and Reception*, published in 1987 by the august Cambridge University Press and edited by Richard Leppert and Susan McClary, one finds such articles as "The Ideology of Autonomous Art," "Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music," "Music, Domestic Life and Cultural Chauvinism: Images of British Subjects at Home in India," and "Music and Male Hegemony." In "The Blasphemy of Talking Politics during Bach Year," Susan McClary, described as "Associate Professor of Musicology and a member of two research centers (Center for Advanced Feminist Studies and Center for Humanistic Studies, for which she was Acting Director, 1985-86) at the University of Minnesota," explains (or rather explains away) the achievement of Bach in the following manner:

> [A]t the same time that this music shapes itself in terms of bourgeois ideology (its goal orientation, obsessive control of greater and greater spans of time, its willful striving, delayed gratification and defiance of norms), it often cloaks that ideology by putting it at the service of an explicit theology. The tonal procedures developed by the emerging bourgeoisie to articulate their sense of the world here become presented as what we, in fact, want to believe they are: eternal, universal truths. It is no accident that the dynasty of Great (bourgeois) Composers begins with Bach, for he gives the impression that *our* [emphasis in the original] way of representing the world musically is God-given. Thereafter, tonality can retain its aura of absolute perfection ("the way music goes") in its native secular habitat. This sleight of hand earned Bach the name "the fifth evangelist" . . .

And then Susan McClary concludes her long article by putting all her cards on the table:

> . . . I would propose the age-old strategy of rewriting the tradition in such a way as to appropriate Bach to our own political ends. Just as Renaissance mannerists justified their subjective excesses by appealing to principles of ancient Greek theory, so each group since the early nineteenth century has found it necessary to kidnap Bach from the immediately preceding generation and to demonstrate his affinity with the emerging sensibility. My portrait of Bach presented earlier clearly exhibits characteristics of the post-modern eclectic, of the ideologically marginalized artist empowering himself to appropriate, reinterpret, and manipulate to his own ends the signs and forms of dominant culture. His ultimate success in this enterprise can be a model of sorts to us all. In actively reclaiming Bach and the canon in order to put them to our own uses, we can also reclaim ourselves.

One of the most interesting aspects of the current trends in musicology is the extent to which it has invaded music criticism. In this century and in our country, music criticism has been the essentially journalistic coverage in venues large or small, popular or elite, of developments in music composition and performance. As the specific gravity, not to mention the attractiveness, of new works dwindled and then vanished, music criticism found itself increasingly focused on performance. And as by the end of the 1960s, traditional performances, along with traditional performers, more and more resembled each other, music criticism began to appear an exercise in making pointless distinctions between identical products or an exercise in nostalgia, in which current performances were held up against past recordings and invariably found wanting.

To some extent, the authentic-performance movement, by bringing a new (though really old) musical product into view, did provide critics with something new to write about. But because the authentic-performance movement was so much a creation of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

academic and quasi-academic thought rather than of autochthonous musical impulses, writing about it, even in the daily press, increasingly required musicological training and a musicological bent: of the two, the bent was by far the more important. And so music critics found themselves writing Sunday think-pieces on ornamentation in baroque music, as advocated in the latest academic treatise, or perhaps a music-magazine article discussing Brahms's style of piano-playing, as demonstrated on an almost inaudible Edison cylinder recording made by the composer before his death in the 1890s.

Perhaps more significantly, a trend has emerged of late in the bringing into musical journalism of the concerns of the cultural studies so beloved now of the new wave of academic musicologists. An outstanding example of this new attempt to write about music by writing about something else very much not music is the spate of articles in *The New York Times* by the University of California music professor Richard Taruskin. This past April, Taruskin questioned the place in the repertory of such beautiful Prokofiev works as *Alexander Nevsky* (1939), the Cello Sonata (1949), and the Seventh Symphony (1951-52)—because they were composed, and officially supported, during the Stalin terror. Then in June, Taruskin claimed that Tchaikovsky's music, seemingly so admired and beloved, was actually under a critical cloud in that "[a]ll of the prejudices commonly directed against woman composers have been directed at him." Taruskin's article then asks, without adducing any evidence to the contrary, ". . . is there any other explanation save latent homophobia for the amazing progress of that notorious tissue of hearsay concerning Tchaikovsky's death (pederastic affairs, threatened exposure, suicide at the behest of some old school chums) in the musical press and even in the scholarly community . . . ?" Here is the bringing up to date of great music with a vengeance, as if all music were present politics.

Underlying this turn to the musicological discussion of performance practice and the bringing into music of the new cultural studies, is an appalling constriction of the market for music criticism and, not surprisingly, a loss of any conviction on the part of the critics themselves that there is anyone out there actually reading them. The death of major American music magazines, those dealing both with live performances and with recordings, is now complete; the last to go was the once-distinguished monthly *Musical America*, which has now become what is delicately described as a consumer-oriented trade publication. The space given to daily music-reviewing has in many places become exiguous; even *The New York Times*, long the last courageous holdout against the pressures to limit the coverage of classical music, has drastically reduced its coverage in recent years of debut recitals and concerts given in smaller halls, while at the same time devoting more space to pre-concert booster pieces.[1] The once-proud *Washington Post*, for many years the home of the redoubtable critic Paul Hume, has now come very close to being a newspaper without influence in the musical world. *Time* and *Newsweek* now rarely cover classical music, and then only when something of presumably piquant interest occurs.

And then, despite all the glorious numbers, there is the continuing and worsening problem of the musical audience. Perhaps more people indeed are going to classical-music concerts and operas, but even this brute assertion seems hard to take at face value, given the total unreliability of attendance figures so characteristic of arts institutions, arts advocates, and arts poll-takers. However many people there actually are in the seats, and however many people *say* they want to, and do, attend concerts and operas, the fact remains that audiences everywhere are increasingly unsophisticated and uncommitted. Subscription series offered to the

1 To keep the record straight, I should add that I have myself written one of these upbeat articles, on the 1991 Waterloo Music Festival, of which I am the artistic director.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

public have fewer events on them each year; mini-series are popular, and with their popularity goes the fractionating of musical experience, as fewer people hear an extensive representation either of the work of the musicians they are hearing, or of the works that constitute the repertory of great music. Then, too, the young seem curiously absent from musical events, and the audience that does come is ever grayer and will, if not renewed, inevitably disappear.

It is precisely this absence of the young from live classical events that seems most ominous for the future. The music of choice for the upwardly mobile Yuppie young is "easy-listening" music: the stupefying docilities of New Age sounds, the less distinctive forms of minimalism, the more emotionally flattened forms of jazz, and especially the sewing-machine inanities of the lesser baroque composers. Indeed, it is hard to avoid the impression that what appeals to the young about the classical music that does in fact interest them is not this music's contrast and variety, not its attempts to storm the heavens, but rather its sameness. It seems clear that what is precisely so attractive about the baroque music now so much in fashion is its unending surface patterns and repeated, and only slightly altered, harmonic and rhythmic sequences.

Performers everywhere are aware that in order to gain the attention of the audience, it is necessary for them to do ever more, not just *with* the music, but *to* the music. Subtle musical gestures, whether made by instrumentalists, singers, or conductors and orchestras, now have little effect; the music can no longer be allowed to speak for itself and to make its points by clarity, refinement, and structural rigor. Instead, each note must be emotionally milked, each tempo made either much too slow or much too fast, each dynamic made either much too loud or much too soft, each contrast of mood made sharper, and the climax of each phrase exaggerated. Sadly, all these attempts at exaggeration have merely served to further deaden audience reaction, producing, as in the case of Zubin Mehta at the New York Philharmonic, a sense of tiredness and ennui. In a more fundamental sense, the very harmonic code of Western music—the tonal system—now seems to have lost both its power with unsophisticated audiences to shock and its former ability with audiences both knowing and unknowing to compel attention. Faced with this aural vacuum in their listeners, performers now find the key to success in fancy garb, clothing men in ruffled shirts and women in *louche* pants suits; among young performers, moussed hair is rapidly becoming the coiffure of public notice for both sexes.

It is difficult to know exactly what has caused the current weakened condition of the audience. Doubtless there are several factors at work: the destruction of classical-music education in elementary and secondary schools; the shift in colleges and universities away from the old, unjustly maligned music-appreciation courses to supposedly rigorous, scholarly courses in music history, theory, and analysis; the calamitously large availability of meretricious pop music, enforced in its circulation by engulfing peer pressure and the unresolved psychosexual yearnings of parents come to maturity in the 1960s; the immense competition for what is now so crassly called the "entertainment dollar" among music, opera, ballet, theater, film, and television.

There is also the current vogue for multiculturalism, the artificial, wholly ideological, and ultimately patronizing urge to advance the cultural products of others at the expense of one's own. In music, this trend has very much weakened the position of the classic masterpieces, in effect forcing a wholesale redefinition of just what one is allowed to call by this term. Doubtless much of the liking for what is now called "world musics" comes from the disaffected young, anxious to break what they see as the shackles of home and nation. In my own experience, the most avid proponents of multiculturalism are those who are paid to promote this cause by public and private funding bodies eager to win publicity and a high reputation for being "politically correct" and on the "cut-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ting-edge" of art. A recent example of this organized attempt to reconstitute the body of culture—in this case, great music—is to be found in *Public Money and the Muse*, a book published this past spring by the American Assembly, a public-policy group headquartered at Columbia University.[2] In this book, funded by the Rockefeller and AT&T foundations, Gerald D. Yoshitomi, executive director of the Japanese American Culture and Community Center in Los Angeles, writes (in a chapter on "Cultural Equity"):

> All of our children must hear the music of the world's great composers played by outstanding symphony orchestras; yet we must also broaden our standard definitions of who is to be included in that "great composers" list.

In one sense, though hardly a helpful one, Yoshitomi is right: it is much easier to expand the definition of the word "great" than to produce great art.

It is difficult not to feel that the real life of classical-music lovers now takes place in the privacy of their homes as they listen to the enormous variety of great music available on recordings. Compared to live concerts, recordings are inexpensive; listening to recordings in one's living room is correctly perceived as both a safer and a more comfortable activity than venturing out at night into the center cities where the great concert halls are still located. On new recordings, through splicing and other kinds of doctoring, performances can easily be made to give the impression—though only the impression—of perfection; by comparison, live concerts, by their very nature, are often technically messy affairs. And then, for more knowledgeable listeners, there is the enormous overhang of recordings from the past, made newly available on CDs in quite extraordinary-sounding transfers. These new-old recordings do indeed provide music lovers with some of the greatest, i.e., most moving, vocal and instrumental performances of which we can have any knowledge. With the scales thus loaded against new performances and performers, it is no wonder that true music lovers are now so rarely to be found at live concerts.

Given the present importance of records in our musical life, a sad word must be said here for the present condition of classical recording in the United States. RCA, responsible through Victor, its predecessor company, for the recordings of Enrico Caruso made in the first two decades of this century, and then, under its present name, for making Arturo Toscanini and Vladimir Horowitz—among many others—available to millions of music lovers, is now owned by Bertelsmann, a German conglomerate; CBS Records, responsible for the wonderful recordings of—again among many others—the Budapest Quartet and Bruno Walter—is owned by Sony, the Japanese electronics and media giant. All the other major record labels available in this country, including Deutsche Grammophon, Philips, Angel, and London, are owned in Europe. The result of this foreign ownership is, quite simply, that the major decisions about what is to be recorded of American music and musicians are made abroad, to satisfy commercial criteria, also determined abroad.

I suppose that the best place to wind up this dreary story is with the institutions and the patrons that make possible the existence and presentation of classical music in America. Classical music has always been a money-losing activity, requiring massive contributions, not to pay the stars but to support the intellectual and artistic infrastructure that has undergirded the Western tradition. Now, despite the massive sums being taken out of classical music by its most successful practitioners, this art is more than ever dependent on contributed income. It is contributed income that in large measure makes possible all the the nonprofit institutions of classical music: these institutions include not

2 *Public Money and the Muse: Essays on Government Funding for the Arts*, edited by Stephen Benedict; The American Assembly/Norton, 288 pages, $22.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

only orchestras and opera companies, but also performing-arts centers, music schools, colleges and universities with music departments, and public television and radio.

What can be said about the present condition of these institutions, institutions devoted either wholly or in part to presenting music, or to training its practitioners? So far as the presenting of music is concerned, it might be helpful in this regard to look at what is going on in New York City, which is still, despite its present shaky social and financial condition, America's cultural capital. Here in New York one need do no more than look at Lincoln Center, the exemplar of all the attempts made in the 1960s and thereafter to centralize the performing arts in new buildings containing adequate and sometimes luxurious facilities and providing through their community status easy access to old and new funding sources both public and private.

As America's premier presenter of the performing arts, Lincoln Center houses the New York Philharmonic, the Metropolitan and New York City operas, and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, in addition to the New York City Ballet and the Vivian Beaumont Theater. I have discussed above the current state of the Philharmonic, and the Metropolitan and New York City operas; it is significant that just this past May the City Opera publicly discussed the possibility of leaving the Lincoln Center umbrella and moving its performances at some point in the future to an old theater on West Forty-second Street. The City Opera's reasons for such a revolutionary departure from the philosophy and practice of the way the musical arts are run in New York are many, and likely include competition from the vastly richer Metropolitan Opera,[3] scheduling pressure from the New York City Ballet, with which the City Opera shares the New York State Theater, and a mounting dissatisfaction with the facilities and acoustics of the State Theater itself. It must be mentioned also that the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, directed for many years by the charming and musically gifted pianist Charles Wadsworth, was not long ago put under the direction of the cellist Fred Sherry. It was widely suspected that the reason for Wadsworth's replacement by Sherry was a desire for concerts that would appeal in style and repertory to the young rather than, as in the past, to the graybeards that form the backbone of the chamber-music public. Yet Sherry's tenure apparently failed to achieve its goals, and he too is now gone, leaving the Chamber Music Society rudderless.

But more important is the increased concentration of Lincoln Center on the independent production of public events. Though its constituent groups largely determine their own policies, Lincoln Center has always been something more than the sum of its constituents. In the past, Lincoln Center had mostly contented itself with the winter "Great Performers" concert series at Fisher Hall and with the highly successful summer "Mostly Mozart" series, also at Fisher. Of late, however, Lincoln Center, founded to be a showcase of the high performing arts, has begun to feel the hot breath of demands that it be socially and politically relevant to what is going on around it in New York City. High culture is not a very popular idea around the rhetorically populist administrations of Governor Cuomo and Mayor Dinkins. In this time of financial insecurity and raised taxes, the publicly funded arts must be seen to reach out to the entire public, not just to an elite suspected of being both undemocratic and rich. The implication is clearly that if the arts—and in this case classical music—cannot so reach out, then so much the worse for the arts and for classical music.

And so Lincoln Center has set about a massive campaign to recast its image. Under the rubric of "Serious Fun!" it has introduced

3 Just how much richer the Metropolitan Opera is than the New York City Opera is shown by a well-founded story that the Met, at a time when the City Opera is concerned with raising year-to-year operating funds, is considering a several-hundred-million-dollar endowment-fund campaign to be undertaken in the coming years.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

summer theatrical presentations, constituted (though as yet with little success) so as to reach the new-life-style public sympathetic to the spicy delights of the aesthetic avant-garde. With maximum fanfare, it has introduced jazz presentation as a Lincoln Center department, to the enthusiastic praise of the once-staid *New York Times.* Indeed, a July full-page Lincoln Center ad in the *Times* said it all: out of the nine attractions featured only three—"Mostly Mozart," "Live from Lincoln Center," and "Great Performers" —could be called classical attractions. Six of the presentations Lincoln Center chose to feature had nothing to do with high culture at all—"Midsummer Night Swing," recommended as a way to "Come dance with us beneath the summer stars"; "Serious Fun!", described in a quote from *New York Newsday* as "the most ambitious commissioning program in the history of Lincoln Center"; "Lincoln Center Out of Doors," described in a quote from *The New York Daily News* as "an outstanding array of events presented in the open air"; "Classical Jazz," described in a quote from *The New York Times* as "The most important jazz program in America"; "More Jazz," described, again in the *Times*, as "promis[ing] to give jazz its proper place in the American artistic pantheon"; and finally "Community Holiday Festival," described simply as "free performances [that] capture the holiday spirit." And as if to give teeth to the new Lincoln Center image, William Lockwood, the long-time head of programming for the "Mostly Mozart" and the "Great Performers" series, has now resigned; informed opinion has it that those responsible for Lincoln Center policy are requiring that Lockwood's replacement must "be more than a classical-music person."

Public television and radio seem ever more concerned with the twin problems of money and ratings; unfortunately, money is not easily available for classical-music broadcasting, and the audience for classical music on television and radio, though perhaps sizable in absolute numbers, is only a small fraction of the audience of tens of millions that now constitutes the only acceptable criterion of media success. In this connection, the devoting by PBS of three prime-time evening slots this past winter to the Peter Sellars productions—or rather distortions—of *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan tutte*, was an ominous sign, in their unabashed appealing to a young, new, and classically unsophisticated audience. On radio, public broadcasting, for all the excellence of the work being done by small stations serving areas of low population density, seems to be giving up its attempt to present serious and extended classical-music concerts in metropolitan markets. Like public television (and like Lincoln Center), public radio appears to have decided to make its pitch to the new trends of gender, ethnic, and sexual multiculturalism; in this shift, classical music can hardly avoid being the loser.

In this discussion of today's musical institutions, it is hardly possible to avoid the problem of music education. Colleges and university music departments across the country, along with music schools, are now turning out thousands upon thousands of graduates each year. As performers, these graduates are facing what is at best a bleak job market; in the better symphony orchestras, there are quite frequently hundreds of applications for each opening. Solo careers, especially for Americans, are practically non-existent. The plain fact is that more musicians are being educated than can possibly find employment; the pressure to find positions for them is one of the major factors in causing the proliferation of performing groups, all competing with each other for an ever-less-committed audience. It is also true that music schools are now drawing an increasing percentage of their students—often, I might add, the best ones—from the Orient. It remains unclear exactly what the motivation for this enormous influx of Asians into our music schools is. What is certain is that, given their limited acquaintance with Western culture, they have special educational needs, needs that are now being ignored. As for musicology graduates, they now find themselves thrown

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

into a hiring world in which tenure-track positions in general are declining, and that for white males hardly exist.

The last element in the current cultural situation of music to be considered is patronage—who pays for music, above and beyond what is taken in at the box office. This patronage has four components: government, corporations, foundations, and individuals. The lines between these components are not always clear, for each component exerts major influence on the other three, and contributions from one tend to draw contributions from the others.

Nevertheless, it is possible to make some general comments about the present state of these components. At the federal level, government support for music has peaked, and is in all likelihood now dropping; by destroying the so-called "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval" of NEA grants and by causing the Congress to shift funds from NEA to state disbursement, the recent scandals at the National Endowment for the Arts have hit serious music particularly hard. Furthermore, over the past few years the NEA itself has made increasingly stringent demands that its serious music grants be spent for "new," "exciting," "innovative," "cutting-edge" programs, all with increased attention to the encouragement of ethnic minorities and such formerly "underserved" areas as rural communities and inner cities. The states, suffering from severe budget crises, have taken advantage of the general loss of prestige for the arts produced by the NEA scandals to cut their own subsidies; the cuts in New Jersey and New York State, for example, have been draconian, not so much causing institutions to go out of business as forcing them to popularize their offerings in the hopes of bringing in a larger paying public. Multiculturalism, too, is now being urged upon government funding sources, and this recommendation—I have mentioned above the ukase from the American Assembly—cannot but fall on political ears quite happy to appeal to organized gender, ethnic, and sexual constituencies.

One assumes—or rather one is repeatedly told—that corporate funding of music remains at much the same level as in the recent past. But it must always be remembered that corporate funding exists not for the sake of music (or the other arts) but for the sake of the image of the corporation. It will be remembered just how generous the oil companies were in supporting public television during the years of oil shortages and consequent high oil prices; though this support has largely disappeared with the decline of OPEC, we are still witnessing the presence of the cigarette industry in arts patronage as a way of ameliorating its very bad public-health reputation. Large corporate cultural grants go exclusively to high-image programs, a category that includes, in New York, both the Metropolitan Opera and the Next Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Whatever the object of support, the requirement is not that the programs and institutions helped by corporations hold out the promise of being self-supporting; it is rather that they promise maximum publicity to the sponsor, and that the publicity be demonstrably targeted to politically, socially, and economically influential constituencies. In the case of small programs and institutions, corporate funding is low, and cannily calculated to spread the minimum amount of money around to the largest number of recipients.

Foundation patronage of music continues to be important, though it must be made clear that great foundations, despite their equivocations and denials, are no longer interested in ongoing support of classical music. Increasingly, foundations, if they concern themselves with music at all, are more interested in capital drives than in operating grants. A corollary of this policy is a disinclination to keep on supporting the same serious musical activities year after year: more than ever, variety is now the spice of foundation life.

And so the discussion naturally comes down to individual patrons. Gone are the days when such figures as Henry Lee Higginson at the Boston Symphony for several

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

decades before World War I, Otto Kahn at the Metropolitan Opera in the 1920s, Clarence Mackay at the New York Philharmonic also during the 1920s, or, somewhat later, Mrs. Lytle Hull, again at the Philharmonic, would take major responsibility for the survival of institutions to which they had devoted their lives. Now musical boards are increasingly populated by people who represent either corporate funding sources or powerful community interests, or who for some reason are thought to be able to go out and raise money from others. There are in this matter no statistics available, so far as I am aware; but the widespread impression in the musical world is that, apart from the great institutions, individual gifts from board members are down, and that in order to get these gifts at all much more is required in the way of accurate balance-sheet projections than of musical excellence. Then, too, following the lead of colleges and universities in the past four or so decades, musical institutions are now seen by their boards as businesses, to be run with financial considerations first in mind and art second. It must be said too that hanging over this entire discussion of individual music patronage is the shift in the criterion for giving from the serious taste of the giver to the expectation of some popularity to be gained by the giver in the media and from the public recipients of his largesse.

Good news and bad news: an enormous human activity, performing much wonderful old music for great numbers of people, performing new music only under pressure and then to persistent failure, with everything done at great financial expense and with uncertain prospects both for the existence of sophisticated audiences and for financial survival. We should make no mistake: the issue before us is the survival, not of the classical music of the past (for great art can be preserved to come back another day) but of the place classical music has occupied in the cultural life of the West over the past two hundred years and perhaps more. During that time, classical music was the transmitter, through its preternatural beauty, of some of the major values of the West. Some of these values, like religion, truth, love, heroism, and honor, were communicated through a collaboration between great music and the extra-musical words and symbols carried by and made more powerful through the music. Others of these values, like order, clarity, complexity, rationality, the worth of individual creation, were communicated more abstractly by the music in the very process of making its greatness manifest.

"All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music," Walter Pater wrote in the latter half of the century that believed art to be the successor to religion as the true salvation of human life. The classical music that we have celebrated has been for us the culmination of our civilization. Unrenewed, properly honored only in private, forced to justify itself to every demagogic politician, editorial-page writer, corporate mogul, and foundation executive, classical music now stands, for the first time in the modern world, on the periphery of culture. No matter how great the worldly success it may enjoy, no matter how high the hype that can be purchased, no matter how large the paying audience can be made to seem, classical music is today in deep trouble. It is not clear whether we can do more than bear witness.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The legacy of Friedrich Nietzsche

by Roger Kimball

The ideal of morality has no more dangerous rival than the ideal of supreme strength, of a life of maximum vigor, which has also been called the ideal of aesthetic greatness. That life is in truth the ultimate attainment of the barbarian, and unfortunately in these days of civilization's withering it has won a great many adherents. In pursuance of this ideal man becomes a hybrid thing, a brute-spirit, whose cruel mentality exerts a horrible spell upon weaklings.
—Novalis

I am no man, I am dynamite.
—Friedrich Nietzsche

Of all nineteenth-century thinkers, perhaps only Karl Marx has surpassed Nietzsche in his influence on the twentieth century. And not even Marx has exercised the intellectual and spiritual fascination commanded by his unhappy countryman. Indeed, as more and more of the political regimes erected under the banner of Marxism repudiate Marx's ideas, it becomes ever clearer that much of what makes the modern world modern also makes it Nietzschean. Nietzsche's glorification of power and his contention that "there are altogether no moral facts" are grim signatures of the age. So, too, is his enthusiasm for violence, cruelty, and the irrational. As Erich Heller put it, Nietzsche has "drawn the fever-chart of an epoch."

This is not to say that Nietzsche would approve of the societies that his ideas have shaped so profoundly. On the contrary, he would regard both the proliferation of democracy and the triumph of mass media and popular culture with a distaste bordering on horror. He would abominate the widespread attack on rank, hierarchy, and social distinction; the political emancipation of women in particular he would reject as (to quote from *The Genealogy of Morals*) "one of the worst developments of the general *uglification* of Europe." Even the casual atheism, relativism, and hedonism of our time—even, that is, behavior and attitudes that might seem (in Nietzsche's arresting phrase) "beyond good and evil"—would earn his contempt precisely for being adopted casually: it was a first principle with this enemy of first principles to make nothing easy for himself—or for us.

One of Nietzsche's greatest fears was creeping mediocrity. If the *Ubermensch* represented his ideal—the ideal of a being strong enough to create his own values, strong enough to live without the consolation of traditional morality—the opposite of the *Ubermensch* was the timid creature Nietzsche called *der letzte Mensch*, "the last man." In a famous passage near the beginning of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche has Zarathustra warn a crowd of followers about this grave spiritual danger:

> "Alas, the time is coming when man will no longer give birth to a star. Alas, the time of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

most despicable man is coming, he that is no longer able to despise himself. Behold, I show you the *last man*.

"'What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?' thus asks the last man, and he blinks.

"The earth is small, and on it hops the last man, who makes everything small. His race is as ineradicable as the flea-beetle; the last man lives longest.

"'We have invented happiness,' say the last men, and they blink. They have left the regions where it was hard to live, for one needs warmth. One still loves one's neighbor and rubs against him, for one needs warmth.

"Becoming sick and harboring suspicion are sinful to them: one proceeds carefully. . . . A little poison now and then: that makes for agreeable dreams. And much poison in the end, for an agreeable death.

"One still works, for work is a form of entertainment. But one is careful lest the entertainment become too harrowing. . . .

"No shepherd and one herd! Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same: whoever feels different goes voluntarily into a madhouse. . . .

"One is clever and knows everything that has ever happened: so there is no end of derision. One still quarrels, but one is soon reconciled—else it might spoil the digestion.

"One has one's little pleasure for the day and one's little pleasure for the night: but one has a regard for health.

"'We have invented happiness,' say the last men, and they blink."

Having heard Zarathustra's description, the crowd shouts: "Give us this last man, O Zarathustra . . . Turn us into these last men!"

I have quoted this at such length because it provides an outline of practically everything Nietzsche found contemptible: the last man's lack of striving and ambition, his meekness and absorption in "little pleasures," even his obsession with health.

If much that characterizes the modern world would disgust Nietzsche, little about its spiritual landscape would surprise him. In announcing "the death of God"—something he described as "the greatest recent event"—Nietzsche foresaw the rise of anomie, the spreading sense of angst and meaninglessness, "the unbearable lightness of being": the whole existentialist panoply of despair and spiritual torpor. All this he diagnosed under the heading of *nihilism*: the situation in which "the highest values devalue themselves" and the question "Why?" finds no answer. The last man, he predicted, would be one response to nihilism, but the full implications of the death of God had yet to unfold. "The event itself is far too great," he wrote, "too distant, too remote from the multitude's capacity for comprehension even for the tidings of it to be thought of having *arrived* as yet." And when they did arrive, what certainties would not suddenly become dispensible!—"for example, the whole of our European morality." Not for nothing, perhaps, did Nietzsche put the first announcement of the death of God in the mouth of a madman. To say that he welcomed this development would be only half true. He thought that it meant liberation, yes: with the death of God, Nietzsche believed that man would be free to create values that accord more generously with human nature than do inherited religious values. But he knew that the loss of religious faith also threatened man with a terrifying rootlessness. What happens when "the highest values devalue themselves"? Who or what will take the place of God? What prodigies will fill the vacuum left by a faltering morality? What unfathomed comforts will man devise for himself in the absence of faith? To a large extent, Nietzsche's philosophy is an attempt to live with these questions: to probe the loss, the temptations, the opportunities that they imply. Nietzsche also seemed to believe that he had fashioned a novel—and honest—response to nihilism, though it is not always clear that his answers are usefully distinguishable from the problems that they are meant to address.

An inventory of the philosophers, writers, and artists whom Nietzsche influenced would form a compendious tour of twen-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tieth-century culture. Heidegger, Sartre, and the other existentialists are inconceivable without Nietzsche; so indeed is Max Weber's theory of value; writers from Rilke, Yeats, Gide, and George Bernard Shaw, to Thomas Mann, W. H. Auden, and Wallace Stevens were all deeply influenced by aspects of his thought; ditto for D. H. Lawrence, Hermann Broch, Robert Musil, André Malraux; Oswald Spengler, author of *The Decline of the West*, wrote that he owed "almost everything" to Goethe and Nietzsche; Nietzsche's most famous book, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, provided Richard Strauss with inspiration and a title for a symphonic tone poem; Freud acknowledged that Nietzsche's insights about human motivation "agree in the most amazing manner" with psychoanalysis; and on and on.

Nietzsche snidely remarked that Christianity was "Platonism for the masses." In the academy today we have what we might call Nietzscheanism for the masses, as squads of cozy nihilists parrot his ideas and attitudes. Nietzsche's contention that truth is merely "a moveable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms," for example, has become a veritable mantra in comparative literature departments across the country. But even if Nietzsche's corrosive beliefs about truth, morals, and religion seem custom-made for fashionable academics, in other respects he is hardly what one would call politically correct. "When a woman has scholarly inclinations," Nietzsche tells us in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), "there is usually something wrong with her sexually." "What is truth to woman? From the beginning nothing has been more alien, repugnant, and hostile to woman than truth—her great art is the lie, her highest concern mere appearance and beauty." Of course, since Nietzsche insisted that truth is "ugly" and exalted "mere appearance," it might be possible to give a positive interpretation of this statement. But I doubt that any hermeneutical legerdemain can salvage his remark that a man who has "depth" should think about woman as "Orientals" do: "as a possession."

More even than with most thinkers, people have taken very different sorts of things from Nietzsche. This is partly a function of his style, which is epigrammatic, literary, and sometimes elusive to the point of enigma. Many of his central ideas and doctrines—the Eternal Recurrence, the *Ubermensch* (which Shaw slyly translated as "superman," thus giving the idea a slightly comic aura), even the Will to Power—have functioned more as suggestive metaphors than as arguments. Indeed, while it cannot exactly be said that Nietzsche spurned arguments, one has the sense that he resorted to them reluctantly: how much better—more dramatic, more convincing—to present an unforgettable image instead of stooping to develop an argument! "Alles, was tief ist, liebt die Maske": "Whatever is profound," Nietzsche wrote, "loves masks." Certainly, Nietzsche loved masks. He was a philosopher, but he often wrote like a poet; and poets, he proclaimed in *Zarathustra*, "lie too much." Is Zarathustra, too, he wondered, a poet? And, we wonder, is Nietzsche?

He is, at any rate, rightly regarded as one of the great masters of German prose. Because of serious eye trouble—Nietzsche was often close to blindness for much of his adult life—he could neither read nor write for extended periods. He tended to compose in his head during long daily walks. "[G]ive no credence to any thought," he advised, "that was not born outdoors while one moved about freely." Hence his preference for the aphorism or very short essay. Most of Nietzsche's books are really a series of aphorisms or extended aphorisms strung together. The contention that such a form is unsuitable to serious philosophical reflection was something Nietzsche rejected: "It is aphorisms! Is it aphorisms?—May those who would reproach me thus reconsider and then ask pardon of themselves." For Nietzsche, the aphorism was the favored companion of insight: nimbler and more eloquent than discursive argumentation. "I approach deep problems like cold baths," he confided: "quickly into them and quickly out again.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

That one does not get to the depths that way, not deep enough down, is the superstition of those afraid of the water, the enemies of cold water; they speak without experience. The freezing cold makes one swift." Nietzsche's particular speciality was the psychological aphorism: the scalpel-like exposure of motives. Here are a few from *Beyond Good and Evil*:

> He who does not *wish* to see what is great in a man, has the sharpest eye for that which is low and superficial in him, and so gives away—himself.
>
> Anyone who has looked deeply into the world may guess how much wisdom lies in the superficiality of men.
>
> One begins to mistrust very clever people when they become embarrassed.
>
> When we have to change our mind about a person, we hold the inconvenience he causes us very much against him.
>
> The abdomen is the reason why man does not easily take himself for a god.
>
> "I have done that," says my memory. "I cannot have done that," says my pride, and remains inexorable. Eventually—memory yields.

Despite Nietzsche's virtues as a stylist, however, it is worth noting that he did not always write well. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, for example, is a pretentious rhetorical swamp, punctuated here and there with glittering observations. (Nietzsche, who believed that with *Zarathustra* he had "given mankind the greatest present that has been given to it so far," obviously thought otherwise: "Having understood six sentences from it," he remarked in *Ecce Homo*, "would raise one to a higher level of existence than 'modern' man could attain.") And Nietzsche himself admitted that *The Birth of Tragedy* was often "badly written, ponderous, embarrassing, image-mad and image-confused, sentimental, in places saccharine to the point of effeminacy, uneven in tempo, without the will to logical cleanliness." It is an irony that many of Nietzsche's admirers have been most beguiled by elements of his work—the idea of the artist as purveyor of "metaphysical comfort" in *The Birth of Tragedy*, for example, or the quasi-biblical rhetoric of Zarathustra—that he later rejected or refused to acknowledge.

Nietzsche's style puts a premium on expression; coherence is another matter. Many critics have endeavored to show that, taken as a whole, his work reveals considerably more unity than is at first apparent; it also undoubtedly reveals a more systematic character that one might initially suspect: epistemology, ethics, metaphysics, aesthetics—Nietzsche had distinctive things to say about all the traditional philosophical topics, albeit he often said them in an untraditional way. It may well be true, as one commentator suggested, that Nietzsche's books are easier to read and harder to understand than those of almost any other thinker. A trip through Nietzsche's books will reveal wildly disparate claims about truth, chastity, the Germans, Wagner, the Jews, morality, science, art, and Christianity—to mention a few topics that absorbed his attention. It is easy to quote Nietzsche to almost any purpose, and it is not surprising that his work has been mined to support ideas that he would radically oppose. Given his insistence that "one does not only wish to be understood when one writes, one wishes just as surely *not* to be understood," this is hardly surprising. The existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers offered the excellent advice that one should not rest content with any assertion in Nietzsche's works until finding a passage that contradicted it: only then would one be in a position to decide what he really meant.

While those influenced by Nietzsche fall into many categories, one useful dividing line is between those who came to Nietzsche before Nazism and those who came later. The former can seem remarkably innocent. Typical is the American writer H. L. Menck-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

en. In his book *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche* (first published in 1908), Mencken presents us with a bluff, irascible Nietzsche who sounds a good deal like . . . H. L. Mencken. "Broadly viewed," he writes, Nietzsche's ideas "stand in direct opposition to every dream that soothes the slumber of mankind in the mass. . . . They are pre-eminently for the man who is *not* of the mass, for the man whose head is lifted, however little, above the common level"—in short, you understand, they are for men a lot like us. Mencken praises Nietzsche's work as a "counterblast to sentimentality"; but what is most likely to strike a contemporary reader is precisely Mencken's own sentimentality: his description of Nietzsche's "noble, and almost holy" sister, Elisabeth, for example, when in fact Elisabeth shamelessly exploited her brother's reputation for her own ends. Even more striking is his sentimentalization of Nietzsche's ideas about morality. For Mencken, Nietzsche was a free-thinking iconoclast, a prickly but not utterly disagreeable ally in the war against what Mencken elsewhere calls the "booboisie."

Nietzsche liked to think of himself as *unzeitgemäss*, "untimely." He believed that his solitary wanderings and meditations had brought him insights far too advanced and devastating for most of his contemporaries. And indeed, some of Nietzsche's writings on truth, language, and morality seem extraordinarily prescient—or at least extraordinarily contemporary. But Mencken's fondness for his thought suggests that Nietzsche was also very much a product of his time, that he was strikingly "timely" as well as untimely. His apotheosis of art, his "immoralism," his celebration of instinct at the expense of reason, his attack on the middle-class, religion, etc.: all this was part of the heady intellectual atmosphere of the *fin de siècle*, in England and America as well as in France and Germany. Even as Nietzsche was suggesting that "to tell the truth is to lie according to a fixed convention," so, for example, Oscar Wilde was bemoaning the "decay of lying" and warning readers not to be led astray "into the paths of virtue." It is worth remembering, however, that attacks on virtue are most attractive when virtue remains well established, just as the homage to power, violence, cruelty, and the like seems amusingly bracing only so long as one doesn't suffer from them.

Nietzsche railed against "Shopkeepers, Christians, cows, females, Englishmen, and other democrats" in a way that Mencken and others could admire and emulate. But Mencken's bluster, alternately amusing and obnoxious, *presupposed* the society and basic values he attacked; Nietzsche's polemic challenged both in the most fundamental way. Where Mencken pronounced anathema on teetotalers, the YMCA, and chiropractic, Nietzsche sought to overturn the very foundation of Western morality. He summed it up this way in *The Will to Power*: "*My purpose*: . . . to demonstrate how everything praised as moral is identical in essence with everything immoral." What would this mean? As always, there are conflicting passages in Nietzsche. In *Dawn* (1881), he concedes that "It goes without saying that I do not deny—unless I am a fool—that many actions called immoral ought to be avoided and resisted, or that many called moral ought to be done and encouraged—but I think the one should be encouraged and the other avoided *for reasons other than hitherto*." Since for Nietzsche "there are altogether no moral facts," there are no actions that are good or bad *in themselves*; if one ought to pursue a course of action traditionally called moral, it is not because it is *good*, but purely for pragmatic reasons. The consequences of this anti-moral view of morality become clearer when one considers Nietzsche's notorious distinction between "master morality" and "slave morality." In *The Genealogy of Morals*, where Nietzsche elaborates the distinction, he reminds us that "One cannot fail to see at the bottom of all these noble races the beast of prey, the splendid *blond beast* prowling about avidly in search of spoils and victory." Once given free rein, Nietzsche writes, his "nobles"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> are not much better than uncaged beasts of prey. They savor a freedom from all social constraints, they compensate themselves in the wilderness for the tension engendered by protracted confinement and enclosure within the peace of society, they go *back* to the innocent conscience of the beast of prey, as triumphant monsters who perhaps emerge from a disgusting procession of murder, arson, rape, and torture, exhilarated and undisturbed of soul.

In 1887, such glorification of violence and "the voluptuousness of victory and cruelty" may have been merely piquant; by the 1930s, when the Nazis appropriated Nietzsche's rhetoric as a garland for their murderous deeds, it had become impossible to view such passages neutrally. Nietzsche's sympathetic commentators are no doubt correct that he would have been horrified by Nazism and the Third Reich. And they are also right that he regarded himself as an ardent "anti-anti-Semite." But, as Nietzsche himself recognized, part of what makes him "dynamite" is the inextricable link between his attack on morality and the immoralism of his "blond beasts." Insofar as someone accepts this, he notes, "his belief in morality, in all morality, falters."

Nietzsche's attack on morality flows directly from his understanding of the nature of man. The chief philosophical influence on Nietzsche's worldview was undoubtedly Arthur Schopenhauer, "the one teacher and severe taskmaster of whom I boast," as Nietzsche put in *Schopenhauer as Educator* (1874), the third of his *Untimely Meditations*. At the center of Schopenhauer's philosophy is the revolutionary contention that the traditional understanding of man as the "rational animal" is all wrong. In a move that anticipated Nietzsche and Freud, he inverts the Platonic-Christian view of man, claiming that man is essentially *will*, not reason. According to Schopenhauer, reason, consciousness, morality, judgment—all the properties that we associate with the ego—are mere epiphenomena of the essentially unfathomable and purposeless striving that animates all nature.[1]

Where traditional philosophy had spoken of reason as the the "pilot" of the soul, for Schopenhauer reason was the will's prop: a puppet buffeted by inexplicable and fundamentally amoral urgings. Schopenhauer believed that man's bondage to the will condemned him to permanent suffering and unhappiness. "*Willing*," he writes, "springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus from suffering." Every apparent satisfaction is merely a prelude to boredom or fresh desire. Hence Schopenhauer's inveterate pessimism. "Existence is certainly to be regarded as an error or mistake," he concludes, "to return from which is salvation." Schopenhauer placed such a high value on art and aesthetic experience precisely because in art he found a temporary refuge from the imperatives of the will. Aesthetic experience "raises us out of the endless stream of willing. . . . [F]or the moment we are delivered from the miserable pressure of the will. We celebrate the Sabbath of the penal servitude of willing; the wheel of Ixion stands still."

Schopenhauer's teaching made an indelible impression on Nietzsche, as it did on so many of his contemporaries. Both the idea that man—that all of nature—is essentially will and his almost religious view of aesthetic experience became permanent features of Nietzsche's thought. Nietzsche at first also accepted Schopenhauer's pessimism. But in his mature work, he inverted Schopenhauer's ethics just as Schopenhauer had inverted the traditional anthropology. Not only was the tradition wrong in seeing man as primarily a rational animal, Nietzsche argued, it was wrong in valuing being over becoming, permanence over evanescence, timelessness over time. Making a virtue of a necessity, Nietzsche came to exalt willing—and hence suffering—as the source of all joy and power. This was his essential innovation on Schopenhauer. Where Schopenhauer saw art as a kind of propaedeutic to renunciation, for Nietzsche art was an alternative to renunciation and the pessimism it presup-

1 See my essay "Schopenhauer's World" in *The New Criterion*, April 1985, pages 83-92.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

posed. Instead of disparaging the will, Nietzsche celebrated it. For him, Schopenhauer's repudiation of existence was evidence of a "rancor against time" that we must learn to overcome. In *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche criticizes those who "encounter a sick or an old man or a corpse, and immediately they say, 'Life is refuted.' But only they themselves are refuted, and their eyes, which see only one face of existence." Paradoxically, in order to affirm himself in his entirety, man must learn to affirm himself in his incompleteness: as mortal and essentially time-bound. Man must learn to say "yes" to time. Whether Nietzsche believed he had achieved the radical affirmation of mortality that he championed is open to question. Although time and again he speaks of himself as a "yea-sayer," he portrays even *Zarathustra* as being bitten by the "tarantula" of revenge; and in one note he confesses that "I have tried to affirm life *myself*—but ah!"

There is a tremendous pathos in Nietzsche's struggle to affirm life. In his investigation into the origin of values, he always asked what lack, what need, what deficiency could have prompted the creation of a given value. In *The Gay Science* (1887), for example, he boasts that "my eye grew ever sharper for that most difficult and captious form of . . . backward inference from the work to the maker, from the deed to the doer, from the ideal to those who *need it*." Yes, indeed: what need could have created the chilly ideal that Nietzsche erected for himself?

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche was born on October 15, 1844, in Röcken, Saxony. The eldest of three children, he was named for Friedrich Wilhelm IV, king of Prussia, whose birthday he shared. The man who would later declare that Christianity was "the calamity of millennia" and who would sign himself "The Antichrist" was swaddled in religion when a child. His father, Karl Ludwig, was a Lutheran preacher and son of a cleric. He was a cultivated man: musical, bookish, and not a little worldly. In the late 1830s he served as a minor courtier, tutoring the three Prussian princesses at Altenburg. He obviously made a favorable impression on the king, for his pastorate at Röcken was in the gift of the crown. Nietzsche's mother, thirteen years her husband's junior, was also a parson's child, brought up to be dutiful and pious. When she married, in 1843, the seventeen-year-old bride joined her husband in a household that included his widowed mother and two unmarried stepsisters. The family of the future apostle of "overflowing health" also featured a potpourri of ailments. Early on the myopic young Friedrich began suffering from the migraines that would plague him throughout his life, while his aunts and grandmother chronically battled a variety of nervous and gastric complaints: these, too, would come to plague Nietzsche. His father was even more unlucky. In 1848 he began suffering from a mysterious brain disease. The diagnosis—a diagnosis that haunted Nietzsche in later life—was "softening of the brain." He was thirty-six when he died the following July.

More tragedy was to come. In 1850, Nietzsche's youngest sibling, Joseph, died. Unable to provide for her family on a widow's pension, Frau Nietzsche soon moved with Friedrich and his doting sister Elisabeth to Naumburg to rejoin her mother- and sisters-in-law who had moved there shortly after Karl Ludwig's death. The serious, exceedingly fastidious youth seemed destined for the cloth. His chief interests were music and theology, and his grave demeanor and absorption in religion inspired his schoolmates to dub him "the little pastor." In 1858, Nietzsche won a full scholarship to Schulpforta, the Eton and Winchester of German boarding schools. He did poorly in mathematics but excelled in languages and literature. By all accounts, Nietzsche became the mildest of men: quiet, unassuming, infallibly courteous and correct. Yet there can be no doubt that he possessed a will of iron. Even as a youth he practiced "self-overcoming" with terrifying severity. Ronald Hayman, one of Nietzsche's many biographers, recounts a revealing episode from the philosopher's schooldays. Nietzsche got into an argument about Gaius Mucius Scaevola, the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

legendary Roman soldier who, captured by the enemy, is said to have thrust his right hand unflinchingly into a fire to prove his indifference to pain. Not to be outdone, the young Nietzsche took a handful of matches, lighted them, and held the burning sticks steadily in his outstretched palm until a prefect knocked them to the ground. The boy had already been badly burned.

Although he continued to be drawn to theology and music—Nietzsche would go on to compose a good deal of piano music, which is of approximately the same quality as his mature theology—he decided to study classical philology. He went first to Bonn, and then followed his mentor, the eminent philologist Friedrich Ritschl, to the University of Leipzig in 1865. It was soon after arriving in Leipzig that Nietzsche stumbled upon an edition of Schopenhauer's chief philosophical work, *The World as Will and Representation*, in a second-hand book shop.

It was in 1865, too, that the distinctly unworldy Nietzsche visited Cologne. Having asked his guide to take him to a restaurant, he was taken instead to a brothel. Stunned by the gauze-clad whores, Nietzsche stood transfixed for a moment. "Then I made instinctively for the piano as being the only soulful thing present," he reported in a letter. "I struck a few chords, which freed me from my paralysis, and I escaped." Whether Nietzsche later returned to this or similar establishments is a matter of dispute. Many commentators think that Nietzsche died a virgin; Freud speculated that he had contracted syphilis at a male brothel in Genoa; and Thomas Mann believed it "incontestable" that Nietzsche's madness was the product of tertiary syphilis. He made Adrian Leverkühn—the protagonist of *Doctor Faustus* whom he modeled on Nietzsche—seek out the prostitute Esmeralda and, despite her warnings, deliberately infect himself: a prelude to his pact with the devil. Nietzsche himself, shortly after he went mad, claimed that he had twice infected himself in 1866, though he was by then an unreliable witness. It is worth noting, in any event, that if his mental collapse was caused by syphilis, the disease took an irregular course: he did not become incontinent, his speech was not slurred, and he retained some control over his memory.

In 1867 Nietzsche embarked upon his two years' compulsory military service but was discharged after a few months because of an injury he sustained falling off a horse. Returning to Leipzig, he made up in philology what he lacked in horsemanship. "He will simply be able to do anything he wants to do," Ritschl wrote, noting that Nietzsche was "the first from whom I have accepted any contribution at all while he was still a student." The future looked bright: in 1868 he met and became intimate with Wagner and his wife, Cosima. The following year, although lacking his doctorate, he was appointed to the chair of philology at the University of Basel on Ritschl's recommendation. Leipzig hastily conferred the missing degree. In 1870 he was promoted to full professor and became a Swiss citizen. At the beginning, at least, Nietzsche seems to have been an effective and popular teacher. A series of public lectures he delivered in 1871 each drew a crowd of about three hundred. Nietzsche's older colleague at Basel, Jacob Burckhardt, the great historian of the Renaissance, noted that "in places they were quite enchanting, but then a profound melancholy would make itself heard."

When the Franco-Prussian War broke out in 1870, Nietzsche volunteered to serve as a hospital steward at the front, in order, as he put it, to contribute his "small share to the Fatherland's alms box." The delicate scholar soon fell prey to diphtheria and dysentery. There is some conjecture—generally rejected—that he may have also contracted syphilis from tending wounded soldiers. Mencken's claim that Nietzsche was "a slave to drugs" is something of an exaggeration, though it is true that around this time he acquired the life-long habit of dosing himself with various drugs. In addition to indulging in other specifics, in later years he regularly resorted to such potent sedatives as veronal

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and chloral hydrate to combat the nightmare of chronic insomnia.

Although he occasionally boasted of his strong constitution, the truth is that by the mid-1870s Nietzsche was a physical wreck and had to be extremely careful about his diet. "Alcohol is bad for me," he confided in the second section of *Ecce Homo*, "Why I Am So Clever": "a single glass of wine or beer in one day is quite sufficient to turn my life into a vale of misery." In 1876 he had to take a leave from teaching, and by 1879 his health had so far degnerated that he was forced to resign from Basel altogether. Given his battery of ailments, what is extraordinary is not that he finally went mad, but that he remained lucid and productive for so long. "My existence is a frightful burden," he wrote to a physician in 1880.

> Constant pain, a sensation akin to seasickness for several hours a day, semi-paralysis in which speech is difficult for me, by way of change furious convulsions (in the throes of the last I vomited for three days and nights; I thirsted for death). . . . If only I could describe to you the continuousness of it, the constant pain and pressure in the head and on the eyes . . .

Although he had earlier made two proposals of marriage (one to Lou Salomé, who later became Rilke's mistress and a friend of Freud's), by the time he came to publish *The Genealogy of Morals* in 1887, Nietzsche believed that "the philosopher abhors *marriage*, . . . marriage being a hindrance and calamity on his path to the optimum." From 1879 until his collapse, Nietzsche lived an increasingly isolated, peripatetic existence, subsisting largely on an exiguous pension granted him by Basel. A single room in modest boarding houses in Rome, Sils Maria, Nizza, Mentone, Genoa, Turin: Nietzsche became a wandering *rentier,* ever in search of salubrious climate for his wretched health. As the Eighties progressed, he found himself with few friends and scarcely more readers. In 1886 he subsidized the publication of *Beyond Good and Evil*, perhaps his most brilliant book. He wrote to his friend Peter Gast that he would have to sell three hundred copies to recoup his expenses. A year later the book had sold 114 copies. "I am *solitude* become man," he wrote in one mournful note.

While a few critics, including Hippolyte Taine, wrote admiringly of Nietzsche's books, his later work was almost completely ignored until the very end of his mentally competent life. In 1888, the Danish critic Georg Brandes delivered a popular series of lectures on his work in Copenhagen, signaling the beginnings of fame. Alas, early in January 1889 Nietzsche collapsed on the street in Turin, throwing his arms around the neck of a mare that had just been flogged by a coachman. Over the next few days, he managed to dispatch a handful of raving letters signed "Dionysus," "The Crucified," etc. His letter to Jacob Burckhardt, for example, begins by assuring his old colleague that "In the end I would much rather be a Basel professor than God; but I have not dared push my private egosim so far as to desist for its sake from the creation of the world. You see, one must make sacrifices however and wherever one lives." To his friend Franz Overbeck he confided that "I am just now having all anti-Semites shot." After conferring with Burckhardt, Overbeck came and removed Nietzsche to a clinic in Basel. Some of Nietzsche's friends claimed to suspect that his madness was just one more mask, one more bit of feigning; in fact his situation was hopeless. After the attentions of various specialists, Nietzsche was released in the care of his mother. He had moments of relative lucidity, but he never regained his faculties.

Nietzsche lingered on in mental twilight for a decade, unaware of his rapidly growing notoriety. His sister, however, was quick to capitalize on it. Fresh from her failed attempt to establish an *echt* German colony in Paraguay with her husband, Bernhard Förster, a rabid anti-Semite who had recently committed suicide, she soon managed to obtain sole jurisdiction over her brother's unpublished writings. Changing her name

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to Förster-Nietzsche to compound the effect, she appointed herself chief guardian and privileged interpreter of his ideas. In order to exploit the burgeoning Nietzsche cult more effectively, she eventually moved her brother to Weimar—the city of Goethe and Schiller—and set about controlling access to his papers, forging letters, and publishing contrived books from miscellaneous notes. She took particular care to emphasize those passages that accorded with her own nationalistic and anti-Semitic inclinations, thus helping to pave the way for the Nazi's glorification of Nietzsche's philosophy. By the time that he died in August 1900, Nietzsche was world famous. But he had long since been unable to appreciate or even comprehend his triumph.

In 1872 Nietzsche published his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music* (revised in its 1886 edition to *The Birth of Tragedy: Or, Hellenism and Pessimism*). Far from justifying the academic establishment's lavish faith in a young unknown, Nietzsche's book seemed calculated to inspire the wrath of the philological establishment. The sharpest barb came from Nietzsche's contemporary at Berlin, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorf, who went on to become the most distinguished philologist of his generation. Enititled *Zukunftsphilologie!*—"Philology of the Future," a disparaging allusion to Wagner's "Music of the Future"—Wilamowitz's pamphlet did indeed catch Nietzsche out in a number of factual errors. And it is probably the case that many of Nietzsche's ideas about the origin of Greek tragedy are, in point of fact, mistaken.

But in an important sense, Wilamowitz's attack was beside the point. For whatever else it is, *The Birth of Tragedy* is not a contribution to academic philology. Completely lacking in scholarly apparatus, it is a bold, speculative inquiry not only into the birth of tragedy, but also into its death and promised rebirth in the operas of Richard Wagner. In part the book is a polemic against the sunny, rationalistic view of Greek culture epitomized by Johann Winckelmann's epithet "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur." For Nietzsche, the neo-classical view of classical culture was shallow and naïve. In its craving for order, it entirely missed the underworld of Dionysian suffering and chaos that stood behind the stately Apollonian figures of the Greek gods and heroes. "The Greek knew and felt the terror and horror of existence," Nietzsche wrote. "That he might endure this terror at all, he had to interpose between himself and life the radiant dream birth of the Olympians." Tragedy was the name of this interposition: Apollo becomes the medium of Dionysus, beguiling suffering by aestheticizing it. Indeed, in one of his most famous lines—repeated three times in the course of *The Birth of Tragedy*—Nietzsche insists that "it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*."

But *The Birth of Tragedy* was much more than an interpretation of Greek culture. It was also the beginning of Nietzsche's criticism of modernity for its allegiance to rationalism and science. In the opposition he drew between Socrates as the embodiment of reason and the Dionysian wisdom of tragedy, Nietzsche was writing as much about nineteenth-century Europe as he was about fifth-century Athens. Modernity has been definitively shaped by Socrates' "audacious reasonableness," as the triumph of science and technology reminds us daily. Yet perhaps Socrates' commitment to reason at the expense of the irrational elided reality rather than revealed it? Perhaps, as Nietzsche said, it was "a sign of decline, of weariness, of infection, of the anarchical dissolution of the instincts?" Truth vs. life: it was Nietzsche's startling conclusion that science was at bottom allied with nihilism because of its uncompromising commitment to truth. "All science," he wrote, "has at present the object of dissuading man from his former respect for himself." In order to salvage life from science "the value of truth must for once be experimentally *called into question*." It is one of the curious features of Nietzsche's mature thought that he wished to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

question the value of truth while upholding honesty as his one remaining virtue. Traditionally, the moral virtues have been all of a piece. For example, Aquinas observes that "nearly all are agreed in saying" that the moral virtues are interconnected, that "discernment belongs to prudence, rectitude to justice," and so on. It is worth asking whether honesty, sundered from the family of virtues, remains a virtue—whether, in the end, it even remains honest. Untempered by other virtues, honesty functions not so much to reveal truth as to expose it. Is that honest? Nietzsche clung to honesty after abandoning the other virtues because it allowed him to fashion the most ruthless instrument of interrogation imaginable. Difficulty, not truth, became his criterion of value. Thus he embraced the horrifying idea of the Eternal Recurrence primarily because he considered it "the hardest possible thought"—whether it was also true didn't really matter.

Nietzsche opposed honesty to truth. He looked to art as a "countermovement to nihilism" not because he thought that art could furnish us with the truth but because it accustomed us to living openly with untruth. "Truth is ugly," Nietzsche wrote in *The Will to Power*. "We possess *art* lest we *perish from the truth.*" Of course, there is also such a thing as dishonest art: art that offers not an affirmation of exisitence but promises an escape from it. Just that, for Nietzsche, was the problem with Wagner and all romanticism: by "counterfeiting . . . transcendence and beyond" Wagner abandoned honesty for the illusion of redemption. What Nietzsche wanted was art that recognized and embraced its status as art, that reveled in appearance *as* appearance. "If we had not welcomed the arts and invented this cult of the untrue," he wrote in *The Gay Science*,

> then the realization of the general untruth and mendaciousness that now comes to us through science—the realization that delusion and error are conditions of human knowledge and sensation—would be utterly unbearable. *Honesty* would lead us to nausea and suicide. But now there is a counterforce against our honesty that helps us to avoid such consequences: art as the *good* will to appearance.

Ultimately, Nietzsche's ideal asks us to transform our life into a work of art. Accepting Schopenhauer's inversion of the traditional image of man, Nietzsche no longer finds human life dignified in itself: if man is essentially an expression of irrational will, then in himself he is morally worthless. This is the dour irony that attends Nietzsche's effort to burden man with the task of creating values rather than acknowledging them. And it is here, too, that Nietzsche's aestheticism and his rejection of morality intersect. For Nietzsche, man is not an end in himself but only "a bridge, a great promise." In order to redeem that promise, man must treat life with the same imperiousness and daring that the artist brings to his work. If, as Nietzsche argued, "life itself is *essentially* appropriation, injury, overpowering what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness," then it is hardly surprising that the perfect aesthete will also be the perfect tyrant.

Nietzsche never tired of pointing out that the demands of traditional morality fly in the face of life. One might say, Yes, and that is precisely why morality is so valuable: it acknowledges that man's allegiance is not only to life but also to what ennobles life—that, indeed, life itself is not the highest court of appeals. But for Nietzsche the measure of nobility is the uninhibited pulse of life: hence his penchant for biological and physiological metaphors, his invocation of "ascending" and "descending" forms of art and life. He defines the good as that which enhances the feeling of life. If "to see others suffer does one good, to make others suffer even more," then violence and cruelty may have to be granted the patent of morality and enlisted in the aesthete's palette of diversions. In more or less concentrated form, Nietzsche's ideal is also modernity's ideal. It is an ideal that subordinates morality to power in order to transform life into an aesthetic spectacle. It promises freedom and exaltation. But as Novalis points out, it is really the ultimate attainment of the barbarian.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Simon Schama, Francis Parkman, and the writing of history

by James W. Tuttleton

The sensation of the summer season—at least among historians—has undoubtedly been the appearance of Simon Schama's *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)*.[1] Readers had come to expect from this Mellon Professor in the Social Sciences at Harvard the writing of rather conventional, even massively detailed and documented histories like his *Two Rothschilds and the Land of Israel* (1977) and *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (1987). But in this current study Schama has given us a radically different kind of book—and has set the discipline of history abuzzing.

Dead Certainties brings together several historical episodes, having an ambiguous logical connection, in order to illustrate some generalizations about historiography as such. There are several accounts of the death in battle of General James Wolfe, who led the victorious British forces against Quebec in 1759 and so forced the French out of North America. (The story of his death —as well as that of his antagonist Montcalm, who also died in the battle—is responsibly told in Francis Parkman's superb history *Montcalm and Wolfe* [1884].) Schama goes on to provide an account of Benjamin West's painting *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770), which idealized the heroic British commander, took London by storm, and assured West's artistic fame. We are also presented a wholly invented diary entry of a British common soldier, who is imagined to have been present at the battle where Wolfe fell. And finally, among other things, Schama gives us a narrative of the murder in 1849 of George Parkman, the historian's uncle, by a disgruntled Harvard professor who owed him money.

Each of these separate subjects might have been the centerpiece of its own historical study. But Schama has violently yoked them together—as he explains in his afterword—so as to dislocate "the conventions by which histories establish coherence and persuasiveness." Coherence and persuasion are out. This is his way of urging upon us "the teasing gap separating a lived event and its subsequent narration." In his insistence on this gap between the event and the narrated representation of it, Schama has apparently gone to school to the skeptics now permeating the profession of history, of whom Hayden White is exemplary. In *Tropics of Discourse* (1978), White tells the profession that

> the historian serves no one well by constructing a specious continuity between the present world and that which preceded it. On the contrary, we require a history that will educate us to discontinuity more than ever before; for discontinuity, disruption, and chaos is our lot.

It is certainly our lot if we choose to make it so, but many will feel that "discontinuity, dis-

1 *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)*, by Simon Schama; Knopf, 333 pages, $21.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ruption, and chaos" are the usual Nietzschean buzzwords expressing the trendy nihilism of the moment. No one wants from the historian a "specious continuity." Isn't that why we invariably test narrative sequences according to historical evidence and what we know of the logic of cause and effect?

But a more decisive question is this: are *all* efforts at representing the continuity between the past and present specious? White appears to think so. Hence, he deplores the reluctance of historians

> to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences.

White need worry no more about the historians' reluctance, since he appears to have found in Schama a disciple willing to profess historical narration as always a constructive invention. (In fact, in *Dead Certainties*, it is a collage of merely juxtaposed elements.) For Schama, "even in the most austere scholarly report from the archives, the inventive faculty—selecting, pruning, editing, commenting, interpreting, delivering judgments—is in full play."

Are these indeed modes of *invention*? Anyone less given to the view that history writing is an inventive freeplay might describe these very activities as signs of the rational intelligence at work in sifting evidence in search of the essence of meaning about men and events in their interaction. At least this is the view held by Francis Parkman (1823-1893), in opposition to whom, in *Dead Certainties*, Schama unwisely aligns himself.

To give Schama due credit, historians *are* "painfully aware of their inability ever to reconstruct a dead world in its completeness, however thorough or revealing their documentation." But the lack of completeness —and even the absence of sameness between the historical event and its narrated form —hardly warrants the historian's abandoning an empirical method, however imperfect of execution, for the imaginative liberties claimed by the novelist. Completeness is in any case impossible—since documents, objects, and other testimony of the past are lost or destroyed over time. More useful is a historiographical method based on what is available, a method sufficiently comprehensive to allow the historian to capture the substance—the pith, heart, and marrow—of the historical subject, a subject like Wolfe's defeat of Montcalm on the Plains of Abraham in 1759 and the consequent fall of the Empire of New France.

Like every great historian, Francis Parkman thought that a serious historical method required him to read every scrap of paper pertinent to his subject, even if it took him off to public and private collections in Montreal, Washington, Paris, or elsewhere. He had exact copies made of everything germane to his subject—the command rosters, lists of orders, diaries, ordnance requisitions, army field correspondence, battle memoirs, governors' reports, missionary accounts, and the like. These he collated with all other documents about the same subject so as to determine whether witnesses were indeed at the scene and were reliable observers. Surviving physical objects, maps, and locations of historical importance were studied intently. It was Parkman's custom to visit the site where an event of historical importance had occurred, like the Plains of Abraham, to walk over the terrain, to visualize the layout of the contending armies, so as to re-create the event as it must have occurred. He was striving, he said in *The Jesuits in North America*, "to secure the greatest possible accuracy of statement, and to reproduce an image of the past with photographic clearness and truth." After minute inspection of all the documents pertinent to the history of La Salle, Parkman went to the Midwest, and, so precise was his geographical understanding, that, in tracing La Salle's movements, he actually found the archeological remains of an important Indian village lost in oblivion, its exact whereabouts disputed for more than two hundred years.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Parkman's historical method was purchased at considerable pain to himself. Afflicted by poor eyesight, migraine headaches, an inability to concentrate, and persistent insomnia, Parkman often found it impossible to work. Whenever "The Enemy," as he called his ailment, overcame him, he had his assistants read to him and take his dictation. He even constructed a wooden frame the size of a sheet of paper, with wires to guide his fingers along the line. And, as he said in a letter of 1864, "The paper for writing was placed between the pasteboard and the wires, guided by which, and using a blacklead crayon, he could write not unlegibly with closed eyes." In the introduction to *Pioneers of France in the New World*, he observes:

> During the past eighteen years, the state of [the author's] health has exacted throughout an extreme caution in regard to mental application, reducing it at best within narrow and precarious limits, and often precluding it. Indeed, for two periods, each of several years, any attempt at bookish occupation would have been merely suicidal. A condition of sight arising from kindred sources has also retarded the work, since it has never permitted reading or writing continuously for much more than five minutes, and often has not permitted them at all.

Physicians had no idea how to cure him and one even predicted an early death. Yet Parkman's determination to finish *France and England in North America* drove him, over a period of several decades, to the completion of it.

Schama is of the opinion that Parkman heroized Wolfe, as he prepared the narrative of the Battle of Quebec, because he could identify with a general who suffered debilitating physical ailments during his campaign against the crafty Montcalm:

> Past and present dissolved at this moment. [Parkman] became Wolfe and Wolfe lived again through him; the man's perseverance and fortitude; the punishments of his body; the irritability of his mind; the crazy, agitated propulsion of his energies all flowed between subject and historian; overtook and consumed him, robbed him of sleep and colonized his days so that the writing of it all, the remembering, the recitation drove him on, relentlessly, became akin to and part of the hard, forced climb [of the British soldiers] upwards to the heights; the drum-measured advance across the field [of the Plains of Abraham], unstoppable till the very finish.

But in fact a perusal of Parkman's multivolume history will disclose that Wolfe was only *one* of his favorites. He was drawn to any historical figure whose vision, energy, and will sufficiently distinguished him from the bit players of history. The redoubtable Champlain was "the Aeneas of a destined people"; the wily old courtier Count Frontenac, who took up the hatchet and danced the war dance before his Indians, was "the most remarkable man who ever represented the crown of France in the New World"; Father Brébeuf was the type of a pure saint and martyr; and La Salle

> was the hero, not of a principle nor of a faith, but simply of a fixed idea and a determined purpose. As often happens with concentred and energetic natures, his purpose was to him a passion and an inspiration; and he clung to it with a certain fanaticism of devotion. It was the offspring of an ambition vast and comprehensive, yet acting in the interest both of France and of civilization.

Parkman tried to be a man like La Salle, who was "a tower of adamant, against whose impregnable front hardship and danger, the rage of man and of the elements, the southern sun, the northern blast, fatigue, famine, and disease, delay, disappointment, and deferred hope emptied their quivers in vain." And, to a substantial degree, Parkman became that kind of passionate, dedicated, ambitious man. Even so, psychobiography has its limits. Although he was a romantic historian who appears to hold the Emersonian view that history is the "lengthened shadow" of the Great Man, Parkman ac-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tually seized upon these figures for their symbolic value. As he remarks in the preface to *Montcalm and Wolfe*, "the names on the title-page stand as representative of the two nations whose final contest for the control of North America is the subject of the book."

Parkman's extensive research, voluminous reading, and personal travel, despite his ill health, were, he said in *Pioneers*,

> essential to a plan whose aim it was, while scrupulously and rigorously adhering to the truth of facts, to animate them with the life of the past, and, so far as might be, clothe the skeleton with flesh. If, at times it may seem that range has been allowed to fancy, it is so in appearance only; since the minutest details of narrative or description rest on authentic documents or on personal observation.

But fidelity to the past involved far more, for Parkman, than patient and scrupulous research into the facts. He thought that the historian had to "imbue himself with the life and spirit of the time. He must study events in their bearings near and remote; in the character, habits, and manners of those who took part in them. He must himself be, as it were, a sharer or a spectator of the action he describes." It is for this reason that he enters so fully into the story of his heroes and appears, in fact, to identify with them.

Further, if new information developed after he had completed a book, Parkman revised it immediately so as to bring his account into conformity with all the known facts. For years he tried to get access to the La Salle documents controlled by the French colonial archivist Pierre Margry, who refused to let them be seen until he could publish them. Parkman finished *La Salle* anyway, confident that his narrative was right in the main. But since no one in Paris would publish these sequestered documents, Parkman persuaded the U.S. Congress to fund the publication of Margry's collection. Parkman's only compensation was that he was then able to correct and enlarge *La Salle*. Finally, footnotes—which, as Gertrude Himmelfarb remarks, seem to have gone out of favor with many contemporary historians—were amply provided by Parkman; and, in case anybody wished to double check his conclusions against the evidence, he always left all copies of his research materials, clearly indexed, for later historical investigators.

What, then, is Schama's method in this book without footnotes? *Without forewarning us*, Schama gives us in *Dead Certainties* concocted scenes, interior monologues, and fabricated diary entries. Thus, his narration of Wolfe and Montcalm at war blurs the boundary between history and fiction. The effect is of a book not differing in kind from, say, James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*. Schama's approach thus very nearly aligns him with the intelligentsia who nowadays tell us that there is no such thing as an essence of an event, that there are really no genres like "history" or "fiction," and that there is no line between expository and narrative prose: there is only discourse, verbal production, *écriture*. It seems probable that our grandchildren will one day regard as juvenile this postmodern penchant for intellectual indiscrimination.

Schama insists in *Dead Certainties* that he does not really scorn "the boundary between fact and fiction"; but an interviewer for *The Guardian* reports him to be pleased with his current role in the profession—"the bad boy of the class enjoying the trouble he didn't quite mean to cause." But for all of this asserted respect for the differences between the two genres, I am inclined to say that Schama *meant* to stir up the ruckus: his treatment of this boundary is not merely playful but perverse. Thus, after giving us what has pretended to be solid history, Schama himself admits that *Dead Certainties* is less a work of historical scholarship than a collection of "historical novellas." One appreciates the candor, but—coming as it does in an afterword—it can only irritate the reader that a deception has been practiced upon him and then—surprise!—the deceit has been revealed. The confession of his "committing a fiction" does not redeem the book: it fails as history. Further, as fiction, it is likewise a flop: Schama is no novelist.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

For Schama, disrupting the conventions aiming at coherence and persuasion justifies itself because, he believes, "historical knowledge must always be fatally circumscribed by the character and prejudices of its narrator." We all concede that a historian's character and prejudices may, at times, distort his understanding. But are we not capable, as readers, of detecting most distortions that arise from prejudice, even as, in real life, we can detect biases in the attitude of friends and acquaintances? When we do recognize a bias, we engage in the rational act that weighs it and that discounts the distortion in its apparent degree; that is, we try to see through and beyond it to the form of truth that is warped by the writer's bias. Of course, it may be harder to see through a lie, unless it is voluntarily confessed.

But one notes Schama's term "*fatally* circumscribed." That implies the epistemological skepticism about the truth, or truth-telling in narrative form, that has now permeated the profession of history. That a distinguished historian, at the top of his profession at Harvard, should dismiss as fatally false every historical account because of the personal perspective of the author is a scandal that the wise will ponder in dismay. It suggests that no historian can be self-conscious enough or objective enough to rise above his own horizon in contemplating the horizon of the past; and it implies that no reader is competent to judge whether or not the historian has sufficiently done so.

If the writing of history is not a branch of fiction, merely, let us say, one of the arts, narrative does offer a mode of myth-making and is thus adjunctive to the feigning of fiction. But storytelling is also a significant mode of thought—a linear, temporal mode central to the mind's grasp of truth in the unfolding of events through time. Perhaps it is more central than logic, inference, deduction, and analogical reason. Surely it is much more *common*, and it is essential to the mental operations by which the truth about that which happened in the past is communicated to our contemporaries and, down the line, to future generations. Of course, any utterance about the past (or the present, for that matter) may express the truth, tell a lie, or misrepresent the truth through epistemological error. But telling the truth, as Heidegger reminds us in *Being and Time*, is not a matter of mere assertion about what happened but of uncovering and disclosing the past in its essential character. Whatever is asserted to be true, and is true, discloses the primordial character of Truth itself. The very existence of what we may—without irony—call Truth is "the ontological condition for the possibility that assertions can be either true or false—that they may uncover or cover things up." Without confidence that a thing or a man or an event has an essence, without credence in an objective, anterior, primordial Truth and in the capacity of *logos* or discourse sufficiently to disclose it, everything quite naturally dissolves into epistemological skepticism, radical subjectivity, and methodological anarchy—which pretty much describes the sad state of the profession of history at the moment. For our trendy intellectuals, essentialism, like coherence and persuasion, is out.

It is a great pleasure, then, to turn away from contemporary skeptical play, as represented by Schama's unwarranted speculations, to the work of Francis Parkman. This superb writer, the greatest historian America has ever produced, is now represented in three splendid volumes in the Library of America series. The first two of these volumes, ably edited by David Levin, present Parkman's lifetime project—a series of seven full-length, independently written yet interconnected and sequential historical studies gathered under the title of *France and England in North America*.[2]

Levin's edition comprises *Pioneers of France in the New World* (1865), *The Jesuits in North America in the Seventeenth Century* (1867), *The Old Régime in Canada* (1874),

2 *Francis Parkman: France and England in North America*, edited by David Levin, was published by the Library of America in 1983 (Volume I, 1,504 pages; Volume II, 1,620 pages; $32.50 each).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Count Frontenac and New France Under Louis XIV (1877), *La Salle and the Discovery of the Great West* (1879), *Montcalm and Wolfe* (1884), and *A Half-Century of Conflict* (1892). The third and newly published volume, edited by William R. Taylor, brings together *The Oregon Trail* (1849) and *The Conspiracy of Pontiac* (1851).[3]

These last two titles, incidentally, although technically not a part of the magnum opus, are yet so germane to the issues raised in the larger work that they have a most pertinent bearing on Parkman's magisterial accomplishment. And that accomplishment was to give us an American epic—the most detailed, comprehensive, and definitive account of the transformation of the North American continent from forest savagery to civilization and of the transition from an Anglo-French to a Canadian and an American culture.

The subject of *France and England in North America* is the epic of these two countries in the American wilderness from 1488 onward. *Pioneers* recounts the initial explorations and settlements in Florida in the sixteenth century (all destroyed) as well as the rise of Samuel de Champlain as the founder of modern Canada. *The Jesuits* narrates the history of the Indian missions, which came to ruin in the Iroquois slaughter of the Christianized tribes. *The Old Régime* has a medley of themes: French conflicts with the Spanish, Dutch, and English (who were simultaneously founding New World settlements); the gradual rise of the military outposts and settlements in Canada and Acadia; the stumbling development of a French colonial policy; and French failures with the Indian tribes. As these books somewhat overlap in chronology, *Count Frontenac* deals with the royal governor who supported La Salle's explorations and the rising conflict between the civil and ecclesiastical authority in France and Canada. *La Salle* relates the tale of the great explorations of the Mississippi Valley region, culminating in La Salle's objective of founding a colony on the Gulf of Mexico, the public and private jealousies he provoked, and his assassination in 1687 by his own mutinous crew. *A Half-Century of Conflict*, written out of sequence, covers the seventeenth-century French and Indian border wars against English settlers, and their mobilization, supported by the mother country, for self-defense. The final death-struggle between England and France for the control of North America is narrated in *Montcalm and Wolfe*, Parkman's masterpiece. It recounts General Wolfe's impossible assault on Quebec, in which the British troops, in a lunatic feat, scaled the perpendicular cliffs at the base of the city, surprised the French on the Plains of Abraham—a meadow or plateau at the top—and routed them, killing Montcalm. This victory in 1759 led to the expulsion of the French from North America and the loss of the Empire of New France. *The Conspiracy of Pontiac*, in Taylor's volume, may be said to conclude Parkman's vast historical overview by recounting the aftermath: the Indian uprising, under Pontiac, against the British in the 1760s and the defeat that doomed the Indians to near extinction.

Although *Pioneers* traces the early Southern explorations, when the whole continent was an unknown world, Parkman's real story begins with Verrazzano's northern voyages, in the 1520s, in search of an alternative route to Cathay. His expeditions opened the northern wilderness to exploration, and Jacques Cartier followed in 1535, coasting the Bay of Saint Lawrence, the site of what is now Quebec City, and "a place he called Mont Royal, now Montreal." Isolated settlements were founded in Cartier's time, but, a half-century later, when the French returned, they had all disappeared—along with all the tribes of the area.

For Parkman, it is with Samuel de Champlain (1567-1635) that we see "the true beginning" of Canada's extraordinary history. "The Father of New France," Champlain traversed the virgin wilderness of eastern Canada, discovered some of the great lakes,

3 *Francis Parkman: The Oregon Trail, The Conspiracy of Pontiac*, edited by William R. Taylor; the Library of America, 951 pages, $35.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and mapped the territory afterward made accessible to settlement. The easy availability of beaver skins, codfish, train-oil, and marine ivory thus awoke in the French "the spirit of commercial enterprise." Between about 1604 and 1635, the French set up principal outposts at Montreal, Three Rivers, and Quebec and opened avenues of trade with the Indians. Along with them, on an errand of Indian salvation, came, of course, the Jesuits.

What was Parkman's view of these Europeans in Canada? As we approach 1992, the quincentenary of the discovery of America, revisionist historians are now trashing Columbus as another Hitler who invaded, brutalized, enslaved, and exterminated the red man. A Minneapolis group calling itself the Alliance for Cultural Democracy has denounced Columbus as the father of colonial imperialism and advised us to skip the celebration. Academic anthropologists are maligning whites for having decimated the Indian tribes, and environmentalists are vilifying the "ecocide" said to be inseparable from advancing westward civilization. The National Council of Churches—preserving its record for getting nearly everything wrong—has even characterized the arrival of the *Niña*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa Maria* as "an invasion and colonization with legalized occupation, genocide, economic exploitation and a deep level of institutional racism and moral decadence." The implication is that the white men who followed in Columbus's wake inaugurated in North America a reign of racist violence over peaceful Indian tribes and all but wiped them out of existence.

As one descended, in part, on my mother's side, from the Cherokee Nation in the Carolinas, I find fascinating this new attention to the Indian tribes. Certainly, in our family, in my childhood, our parents instilled in us great pride in our Cherokee ancestors, whose lives seemed much more adventurous, tragic, and romantic to us, as children, than that of our other forebears—the English, Scots-Irish, and German ancestors who filled out our "typically American" inheritance. (My father, in a tobacco trope, used to speak of all true Americans as a "Duke's Mixture" of blended ethnic and national origins.) Off and on I count myself a full Cherokee, although I do not have the copper complexion, black hair, and high cheekbones of my uncles, and even today I have the illusion that I am a crack shot and have an unerring instinct in the woods.

However that may be, I must remark that I find the current eruption of white guilt over the fate of the primitive Native American tribes to be as spurious as it is ignorant of the historical reality of aboriginal existence. What, in fact, did Champlain and his followers discover about the character of Indian life in 1600?

I shall pass over the ethnographic charm of life in the long house, where up to ten families might live in filth, smoke, and vermin-infested proximity. Nor is there any point in discussing the malnutrition arising from a diet of whatever animals could be killed and of maize (if the tribes bothered to plant and remained to harvest). Periodic starvation was a given and dislocation in search of game a constant. Parkman's account of various Indians and French explorers reduced to a diet of "moss, the bark of trees, or moccasins and old moose-skins cut into strips and boiled" accents the suffering of the native way of life. However, I was particularly taken with what the French called "*tripe de roche*, a species of lichen, which, being boiled, resolved itself into a black glue, nauseous, but not void of nourishment." Life for Indian women was particularly brutal. While the braves lusted for war, conquest, and scalps, their squaws had to gather the firewood, sow, till, harvest, cook, smoke fish, dress skins, and make their rude garments. In the words of Champlain, "their women were their mules." No wonder this life broke them down. Parkman concludes of this female brutalization: "In every Huron town were shrivelled hags, hideous and despised, who, in vindictiveness, ferocity, and cruelty, far exceeded the men."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Champlain found—and generations of subsequent observers confirm—that Indian life was one of constant savage tribal warfare. (Columbus found the same thing among the Caribs, Arawaks, and other tribes of the Southern Sea.) Any Indian with sufficient personal credit, Parkman reminds us, could dance a wardance, sing a warsong, bury his hatchet in the warpost, and inflame his tribesmen to follow him on the warpath against some nearby (or even distant) tribe. A war party, seized with homicidal fury against another tribe, might paddle fifty or five hundred miles to butcher a rival.

In 1600, to the east, in what is now New York and southern Canada, the Five Nations of the Iroquois (the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas—and later the Tuscaroras) were brutally ravaging the Algonquin tribes along the Great Lakes. War parties of one tribe or another were continually assaulting enemy villages, braining the inhabitants in their sleep, butchering those who could not escape, and taking many prisoners. Even an enemy tribe's burial grounds were not sacrosanct. After a raid, victorious Indians often dug up the enemy dead, took scalps as trophies, stole the clothes, burned the bodies, and danced in celebration.

The modern anthropological view—that theirs was "a warrior culture," with which they were of course in "natural harmony" —will not do. Women and children, and the old and the infirm, were choice victims —especially when the braves of an enemy village were away in the maize fields or, often enough, on raiding parties of their own. In his *Relation* for 1642, Father Vimont reports on the fate of several captured Algonquins:

> Among these were three women . . . who had each a child of a few weeks or months old. At the first halt, their [Iroquois] captors took the infants from them, tied them to wooden spits, placed them to die slowly before a fire, and feasted on them before the eyes of the agonized mothers, whose shrieks, supplications, and frantic efforts to break the cords that bound them were met with mockery and laughter.

What seems inescapably evident, from an overwhelming mountain of testimony, is this: that only butchery and torture could slake the bloodlust that afflicted every Indian tribe, in one degree or another, from the Canadian wilderness to Florida, and from the Eastern seaboard to the Pacific forests.

Indian torture was especially diabolical. If prisoners were taken, they were tied up and marched around, from village to village, and mounted on scaffolds as a public spectacle. Hair and beards were torn out, fingernails were gnawed, or fingers burned off. A favorite device was the sharpened splinter rammed up the penis. A fiendish effort was made to preserve the life and prolong the conscious agony of the victim. Any sign of pain produced paroxysms of public glee and was ridiculed as cowardice. "In the torture of prisoners," Parkman remarks, "great deference was paid to the judgment of the women, who, says Champlain, were thought more skilful and subtle than the men." Even the Indian children, spurred by the savagery of their parents, "amused themselves by placing live coals and red-hot ashes on the naked bodies of the prisoners, who, bound fast, and covered with wounds and bruises which made every movement a torture, were sometimes unable to shake them off." Then prisoners were often burned alive. Equally as often the victim was slit open and his blood drunk by the savages. Thereupon the body was cut into quarters like butcher's meat, cooked in kettles, and eaten with voracious satisfaction. As Parkman dryly remarks in *A Half-Century*, "the benevolent and philanthropic view of the American savage is for those who are beyond his reach. It has never yet been held by any whose wives and children have lived in danger of his scalping-knife."

Parkman rightly gives full play to the frenzy of these Indian atrocities, which were stupefying to the French, but they are frankly so commonplace in the history of these

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tribes that some of the accounts he passes over as too repetitive or "too revolting to be dwelt upon." Parkman remarks that there is reason to believe that the "process of extermination, absorption, or expatriation" had "for many generations formed the gloomy and meaningless history of the greater part of this continent." Of this record of Indian-versus-Indian carnage, which "had existed time out of mind," he concludes in *A Half-Century*:

> There is a disposition to assume that [such] events . . . were a consequence of the contact of white men with red; but the primitive Indian was quite able to enact such tragedies without the help of Europeans. Before French or English influence had been felt in the interior of the continent, a great part of North America was the frequent witness of scenes still more lurid in coloring, and on a larger scale of horror. In the first half of the seventeenth century, the whole country, from Lake Superior to the Tennessee, and from the Alleghenies to the Mississippi, was ravaged by wars of extermination, in which tribes, large and powerful, by Indian standards, perished, dwindled into feeble remnants, or were absorbed by other tribes and vanished from sight. French pioneers were sometimes involved in the carnage, but neither they nor other Europeans were answerable for it.

Parkman's analysis of the tribes' relations with each other, over two centuries, ought to dispel forever the current myth of the natives' congenial existence wiped out by the warmongering of genocidal whites. At most one can say that, later on, in giving the Indians guns, Europeans merely accelerated the pace of the slaughter and became even more complicit in it.

It is no wonder, therefore, that the Ottawas, the Mohicans, Wampanoags, Hurons, and other Algonquins—in awe of French cannon and musketry—petitioned Champlain to defend them from the savage fury of the Mohawks, the Senecas, and others of the Five Nations. Out of these early Indian appeals to Champlain for protection developed the French policy in dealing with the Indians:

> It was the aim of Champlain, as of his successors, to persuade the threatened and endangered hordes to live at peace with each other, and to form against the common foe [the Iroquois and the English] a virtual league, of which the French colony would be the heart and the head, and which would continually widen with the widening area of discovery. With French soldiers to fight their battles, French priests to baptize them, and French traders to supply their increasing wants, their dependence would be complete. They would become assured tributaries to the growth of New France.

This policy, of course, brought down on Champlain the wrath of the Iroquois, who slaughtered or enslaved many of his soldiers and periodically destroyed the French settlements. (It is likely that the slaughter would have occurred whatever policy had been in effect.) In any case, the trading company in Paris, which had a royal monopoly on Canadian imports, virtually went bankrupt, and for a good many decades after the first French settlements "the wilderness of woods and savages had been ruinous to nearly all connected with it."

The failure of the earliest outposts to gain a solid foothold in Canada between 1600 and 1650 had much to do with France's failure to grasp the character of the native inhabitants. *The Jesuits in North America in the Seventeenth Century*, which tells the story of the missionaries who accompanied Champlain into the wilderness, throws a clearer light on how the early French and Indians dealt with each other. This book is substantially based on the massive collection of documents called the *Jesuit Relations*, a series of annual missionary reports, composed over nearly two centuries, sent back to the Provincial of the Order in Paris. Parkman, although rationalist and anticlerical, rightly trusts the essential accuracy of these reports, but he cannot conceal—and indeed makes no effort

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to conceal—his hostility to the Catholic Church and to the Society of Jesus.

For Parkman, the Jesuit was a "moral Proteus" in the service of a monolithic church bent on attaining, at any price, temporal power. Subservient to Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, the priests were contemptuous of the body and so ready to die "in unquestioning subjection to the authority of the Superiors, in whom they recognized the agents of Divine authority itself." Their training, for Parkman, thus did "horrible violence to the noblest qualities of manhood"; it joined them "to that equivocal system of morality which eminent casuists of the Order have inculcated" and thus produced "deplorable effects upon the characters of those under its influence." Nothing was more sinister to Parkman's protestant imagination than the Jesuits' being

> everywhere,—in the school-room, in the library, in the cabinets of princes and ministers, in the huts of savages, in the tropics, in the frozen North, in India, in China, in Japan, in Africa, in America; now as a Christian priest, now as a soldier, a mathematician, an astrologer, a Brahmin, a mandarin, under countless disguises, by a thousand arts, luring, persuading, or compelling souls into the fold of Rome.

Though not a Catholic myself, I have no trouble in identifying Parkman's bias and so weighing and discounting it, in the appropriate degree, as I proceed through the narration of these historical events. This is made all the easier to do because Parkman recognizes the bias in himself, warns us of it (he will occasionally announce, "This is the view of a heretic"), and tries to right the balance. In discussing François Xavier de Laval-Montmorency, the first bishop of Quebec, for example, Parkman realized that he would offend many pious Canadian Catholics for whom Laval was "an object of veneration." But he nevertheless announces his intention to "regard him from the standpoint of secular history" and so recounts his political machinations as if he were any Machiavellian lay politician. Elsewhere he remarks that "those who wish to see the subject" of *The Old Régime in Canada* "from a point of view opposite to mine cannot do better than consult the work of the Jesuit Charlevoix, with the excellent annotation of Mr. Shea." Despite Schama, then, not every historian's work is fatally compromised by a personal perspective.

The salvation of pagan souls, for Parkman, was the Jesuits' sole original motive. To this end, *ad majorem Dei gloriam*, they sought out the Indians, settled in their encampments, learned their languages, adopted many of their customs, "studied the nature of the savage, and conformed themselves to it with admirable tact." Instead of treating the Indian as "an alien and barbarian," Parkman observes, "they would fain have adopted him as a countryman." These Jesuits taught the gospel, baptized converts, and inculcated a morality that condemned polygamy, frivolous divorce, licentiousness, murder, cannibalism, feasts, dances, and violent games. "Gentleness, kindness, and patience," Parkman notes, "were the rule of their intercourse." The Indians were skeptical, credulous, and capriciously compliant: the black-robed strangers had a "powerful medicine." But, just as often, they suspected the Jesuits of causing all the ills that befell them. In the smallpox epidemic of 1636, the priests, desperate to save souls, forced their way into Indian huts to baptize the dying children. The savages of course thought the young died *because of* the baptism and so murdered many of the priests.

Often enough they were murdered simply because they were Frenchmen. As Parkman observes, "not the most hideous nightmare of a fevered brain could transcend in horror the real and waking perils with which [the Indians] beset the path of these intrepid priests." In 1649, the Iroquois wiped out a whole band of Christian Hurons at Saint Ignace. Father Jean de Brébeuf, "the founder of the Huron mission, its truest hero, and its greatest martyr," was put to the stake. They hung around Brébeuf's neck "a collar made

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of hatchets heated red-hot." They poured boiling water on his head in a mock baptism. They "cut strips of flesh from his limbs, and devoured them before his eyes."

> After a succession of other revolting tortures, they scalped him; when, seeing him nearly dead, they laid open his breast, and came in a crowd to drink the blood of so valiant an enemy, thinking to imbibe with it some portion of his courage. A chief then tore out his heart, and devoured it.

Work in the Jesuit missions in the seventeenth century was thus a "living martyrdom," but these earnest Jesuits "burned to do, to suffer, and to die." Even so, their efforts were doomed. The incessant Iroquois slaughter of the lake tribes, and the latter's flight to the west—together with contagious disease and a French policy unequal to dealing with Indian violence—wiped out many of the Algonquins, and, by the end of the seventeenth century, most of the missions had failed.

Despite his anticlericalism, Parkman had the decency to concede that it was the Church's

> nobler and purer part that gave life to the early missions of New France. That gloomy wilderness, those hordes of savages, had nothing to tempt the ambitious, the proud, the grasping, or the indolent. Obscure toil, solitude, privation, hardship, and death were to be the missionary's portion.

Parkman found, in the lives of Fathers Lejuene, Garnier, Jogues, and many others, "a solid nucleus of saint and hero," even though their virtues shone "amidst the rubbish of error, like diamonds and gold in the gravel of the torrent." He concludes that "the missionaries built laboriously, and well," but they were doomed: "the cause of the failure of the Jesuits is obvious. The guns and tomahawks of the Iroquois were the ruin of their hopes."

Parkman's friend the Abbé Henri-Raymond Casgrain, working in the same field of history at Laval University, carried on a lengthy correspondence with Parkman about this overt prejudice. Speaking of the Jesuit missionaries, Casgrain wondered—as Mason Wade reports in his excellent biography *Francis Parkman* (1972)—how Parkman could draw the line between their heroism and their faith:

> Like me [Casgrain writes], you cannot withhold your admiration of these men who sacrificed themselves with so much constancy and heroism for the love of mankind. . . . What colossuses, you say, and justly. But are you indeed sure that they would have been such great men without their blind obedience, without their enthusiastic faith?

Parkman could only insist that he was a rationalist, not a supernaturalist.

Some pious Canadians attacked Parkman in bitter terms, especially when Laval University proposed to grant him an honorary degree. But many others judged him responsible and thorough in his assemblage of the facts about the Jesuit missions. As Casgrain put it, "your book is the work of a thinker and of a great painter; and Canada owes you an eternal debt for having made its history so much admired."

To understand Parkman's view of the Indian, whose soul was the principal concern of these missionaries and whose decline forms the romance of poetry, myth, and legend, there is perhaps no better starting place than the long expository chapter that introduces *The Conspiracy of Pontiac*—"Indian Tribes East of the Mississippi." This ethnographic essay is much too long to summarize, but it knowledgeably recounts the tribal divisions, totem clans, modes of government, myths, arts, agriculture, and the customs and character of the Indian. It also strives for the kind of balance evident in his treatment of the Jesuits. But it must also be said at the outset that Parkman is a liberal anthropologist's worst nightmare. That is, he believed that the Indians were indeed savages, that their "culture" was hardly

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

worth the name, and that the advance of civilization at their expense was not only inevitable but a manifestation of their own social and psychological deficiencies.

Although Parkman's grasp of Canadian affairs was based on voluminous reading, he was not without a first-hand understanding of Indian character and life. In fact, the 1846 journey recorded in his first book, *The Oregon Trail*, was specifically undertaken "with a view of studying the manners and character of Indians in their primitive state."

> Having from childhood felt a curiosity on this subject, and having failed completely to gratify it by reading, I resolved to have recourse to observation. I wished to satisfy myself with regard to the position of the Indians among the races of men; the vices and virtues that have sprung from their innate character and from their modes of life, their government, their superstitions, and their domestic situation. To accomplish my purpose it was necessary to live in the midst of them, and become, as it were, one of them. I proposed to join a village, and make myself an inmate of one of their lodges.

In the 1840s, in the Far West, the Sioux, Pawnees, Snakes, Arapahoes, Oglalas, and other tribes he visited had had virtually no contact with whites, and so "their religion, their superstitions, and their prejudices were the same that had been handed down to them from immemorial time. They fought with the same weapons that their fathers fought with, and wore the same rude garments of skins."

In launching out from Saint Louis into the unknown world of these aborigines, in order to observe and record what could be known of "their vanishing existence," this Boston Brahmin experienced a distinct "culture shock." Despite a disabling illness that often made it impossible for him to walk or ride, he nevertheless explored the Fort Laramie and Platte River areas, the Black Hills, and the interior regions of the Arkansas River country. For several months he lived with Sioux. While the short time he spent among them and his lack of the requisite native languages limited his grasp of what he saw, his report has an authenticity lacking in Cooper's account of the Pawnees in *The Prairie*. The adventure of the uncharted prairies and mountains, the buffalo hunts, the motley crew of hunters, trappers, migrants, half-breeds, soldiers, Mexicans, and Mormons is wonderfully detailed. His encounters with the Indians brought him close to death several times, and he came to value his weapons of self-defense—a good horse, a rifle, and a knife.

This Harvard man could not help comparing the Indians' condition with the life he had known in Boston. In remarking on the differences, the young Parkman observes:

> For the most part, a civilized white man can discover but very few points of sympathy between his own nature and that of an Indian. With every disposition to do justice to their good qualities, he must be conscious that an impassable gulf lies between him and his red brethren of the prairie. Nay, so alien to himself do they appear, that having breathed for a few months or a few weeks the air of this region, he begins to look upon them as a troublesome and dangerous species of wild beast, and if expedient, he could shoot them with as little compunction as they themselves would experience after performing the same office upon him.

If this seems callous, it may be simply common sense. Or we may take it as a reflection of the pull toward savagery, the regression to barbarism in whites, oft noted in the literature of the wilderness. La Salle had encountered it with his mutinous men, who stole his supplies, wrecked the ship he was building, and escaped into the forest, leaving a message scrawled on the bows of the hulk: "Nous sommes tous sauvages." Even so, young Parkman made friends with many of the Sioux braves, admired their courage and physical skills, undertook to learn the Dahcotah language, observed them on the warpath, shared in some of their tribal diversions, and found "at least some points of sympathy" between their savage and his own civilized condition.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Nevertheless, the whole experience of living for a time beyond the pale of civilization, beyond the reach of law, in a state of pure anarchic violence, taught him that the "softhearted philanthropy" of the Rousseauist was a dangerous illusion. Given the readiness of Indians to go on the warpath, against one another or against whites, he formed, in advance of Darwin, what one might call his philosophy of history: "from minnows up to men, life is an incessant battle." This philosophy, amply illustrated in the voluminous colonial records he assembled, informs his story of the Indian tribes in the contest between France and England for the control of North America. As he remarks in *Pioneers*, "The story of New France is from the first a story of war"—war between France and Spain, France and England, France and the Indians, the Indians and the English, and the Indians against one another. At any time in the first two centuries of European immigration, the Indians—if they had united, if they had not been continually at war among themselves—could have combined to drive out the whites. Yet, "in this crisis of their destiny, these doomed tribes were tearing each others throats in a wolfish fury, joined to an intelligence that served little purpose but mutual destruction." Their incessant intertribal hostilites, poor planning for winter subsistence, unsanitary living conditions, and susceptibility to disease made them, for Parkman, unequal to the changing circumstances produced by European immigration. "The Indians melted away," Parkman concluded in *The Jesuits*,

> not because civilization destroyed them, but because their own ferocity and intractable indolence made it impossible that they should exist in its presence. Either the plastic energies of a higher race or the servile pliancy of a lower one would, each in its way, have preserved them; as it was, their extinction was a foregone conclusion.

We hear much nowadays, in this age of multicultural education, about the contribution of Native Americans to the general culture. And there is much that is positive to appreciate. But it is an extraordinary fatuity to claim that the pact uniting the Five Nations was in any sense a model for the political theory of the Founding Fathers or that it was instrumental in the development of the American Constitution. Parkman is right in saying that the Iroquois "organization and their intelligence were merely the instruments of a blind frenzy, which impelled them to destroy those whom they might have made their allies in a common cause." In fact, the Iroquois had no ordinances or laws governing tribal relations, merely totem affiliations that bound them in warfare against others. Based on what he knew of the Indians of the West and what he discovered in the archives of Canada, Parkman concludes: "That the Iroquois, left under their institutions to work out their destiny undisturbed, would ever have developed a civilization of their own, I do not believe." We may or may not agree with his conclusion, but the evidence about their violent way of life must be disturbing. In any case, it is impossible to disagree with his view that "the representations [of the Indian] given by poets and novelists" are "mere creations of fancy." The Indians' "good qualities," for Parkman, "were not those of an Uncas."

As for the French, their royalist authoritarianism and religious absolutism unfitted them to succeed in the New World, especially as the English colonies were extending past the Alleghenies the idea of decentralized liberty and religious pluralism. France's "records shine with glorious deeds, the self-devotion of heroes and of martyrs," but for Parkman "the result of all is disorder, imbecility, ruin." At the time he wrote his history, he felt confident that the Canadian union represented the triumph of Anglo-American republican principles and that "the French dominion is a memory of the past." But many of French descent in Quebec now wish to secede from Canada, and Indian tribes are newly asserting, in court, "aboriginal rights" to immense tracts of land already settled with Canadian towns, villages, and farms.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

One Mohawk tribe, denouncing both white governments for having "betrayed and killed our people for centuries," has defended its aboriginal right to run a gambling casino in Saint Regis, on the Canada-New York border, by engaging in shoot-outs with the police. (In an apparent gesture of solidarity, Colonel Muammar el-Qaddafi of Libya has given the Mohawks a quarter of a million dollars to carry on the struggle.) It is not a matter of "spurious continuity," I believe, to observe that these recent events follow from the reverberating decisions of Louis XIV and XV, Champlain, Frontenac, La Salle, and Montcalm so many years ago.

If Parkman composed his history so as to condemn "Feudalism, Monarchy, and Rome," and if he organized his narrative as an illustration of the antagonism between "Liberty and Absolutism," we have at least the verdict of history—what actually happened in New England and New France—against which to test his conclusions. He underestimated the enduring power of the Catholic faith in Canada but he was right about the end of feudalism and royalism. His other faults have to be weighed in the balance—his overemphasis on his thesis, the continual Jesuit-baiting, a rhetorical straining after the purple passage, the exaltation of the great man, "insensitivity" to PC ethnic attitudes, a suspicion of the democratic mob, and so on. But his scope is vast, his subject compelling, his research more than merely responsible, and his writing moves: he handles masses of material with vivid power and intensity, maintains suspense with dramatic skill, and is a superb storyteller. And what a story he had to tell!—nothing less than the epic struggle of France and England for the control of North America. But of course that story, comprehensive as it is in Parkman's masterly version of it, was merely the prologue to another story of even greater import.

Before the middle of the seventeenth century, the English, as Parkman observes, actually "had an interest in keeping France alive on the American continent": the French and Indian threat kept the American colonies loyal to the English Crown. But after the defeat of Montcalm, a Boston minister, John Mayhew, said that, given the French expulsion from North America, "with the continued blessing of Heaven [the American colonies] will become, in another century or two, a mighty empire." Then Mayhew added a "cautious parenthesis"—"*I do not mean an independent one.*" As Parkman observes, Mayhew "had read Wolfe's victory aright, and divined its far-reaching consequences." It would take another twenty years for the restive American colonists to break away from the mother country, but there can be no doubt that, in destroying New France, England inadvertently made possible the new nation of America, founded by her own colonial subjects.

Compared to other nineteenth-century historians like Prescott, Sparks, Bancroft, and Motley, Parkman stands out as the best—as Henry Adams conceded. And certainly there has been no one yet in the twentieth century to rival him. As for the future, if current historians follow the postmodern approach of Simon Schama—inventing scenarios for the sake of imagining "alternative narrations"—Parkman will be our most distinguished historian for some time to come.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Literary life in the 1990s

by Bruce Bawer

In its essentials, I suppose it could be said that the literary life—outside the university, anyway—is pretty much the same as it has always been: a serious writer today spends most of his waking hours alone with words, his or other people's, and every now and then gets together with a few colleagues to talk books and to exchange gripes and gossip and ideas. If by "literary life" one means contact with other people, then the term is something of an oxymoron, for when he is busy trying to create literature—or, for that matter, trying to say something useful about it—he doesn't have much time or inclination to socialize, and might as well reside in Greenville, South Carolina, as in Greenwich Village. Even for the writer who lives in or near New York City, which remains the hub of the American literary world—with spokes reaching out to Boston, the Bay Area, the Twin Cities, and every sizable campus in the country—a productive literary life is likely to involve only an occasional reading, lecture, book party, or meal with an editor. Once in a while, if he's invited to spend a month at an artists' colony or to participate in a writers' conference, the writer might even leave New York and spend several evenings in a row dining, dancing, and drinking with a dozen or so other writers. But generally speaking, his professional life is likely to be much more solitary than that of, say, the average businessman.

Like most people who create in solitude, the writer may find encounters with other people to be a distraction, even a strain. If he nonetheless finds himself, at six o'clock of a lovely spring evening, putting on a suit and taking an hour-long subway ride to the National Arts Club for an Evening of Alaskan Poetry (with cocktails to follow), it is because he needs to feel that he is part of an artistic and intellectual community, needs to know that he is being read by at least some of the people whom *he* reads and that his work is making some sort of an impression. And these affairs do add up. The writer enters upon the literary life not knowing anyone; but if he attends literary events even sporadically and with an adventurous catholicity, after a few years—which, in retrospect, he is apt to feel he has spent with his fingertips glued to a word-processor keyboard—he may one day flip through his address book and realize that, at some time or another, he has met almost everybody.

Of course, "almost everybody" is not a large number of people. The literary world is a small and ill-defined one, its territory overlapping those of the academic world, the art world, the worlds of journalism and slick magazines and political writing. Small as it is, moreover, it is highly stratified and compartmentalized. There are downtown writers who hate to venture above Fourteenth Street and uptown writers who feel the same way about going to the Village; there are writers who would not be caught dead at a free reading in a hardware store on Columbus Avenue or in a basement apartment on

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

East First Street and writers who would not attend a reading for which they'd have to pay seven dollars and wear a tie. Some of the faces one sees at a *Paris Review* cocktail party may pop up later in the month at a Guggenheim or 92nd Street Y reading, or at the annual awards ceremony of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, but they're not likely to show up for readings at Saint Mark's Church or Three Lives Books or the Donnell Library. The poets don't read much fiction and the fiction writers don't know anything about contemporary poetry, but the poets—even those who spend most of the year teaching in Texas or Michigan or Idaho—all seem to know one another and to keep tabs on one another's work. Probably there are more writers teaching around the country than there are living in the East Village and on the Upper West Side; but only in Manhattan does a writer feel that he is truly in the literary *métropole*, as it were, and then only in certain places, on certain occasions, and in certain company.

Even smaller than the literary world, these days, is the number of people in it to whom literature itself is a cherished—indeed, an indispensable—concept. From time to time during the last decade or so, many serious book folk have felt about the literary scene much as devout Episcopalians do in highly politicized, New Agey parishes: namely, that the church has been taken over by infidels. By people, that is, who profess not to like the word "literary," which they claim to find elitist, exclusionary, fascistic; who have accepted the academic argument that greatness is a myth and that the "privileging" of certain works is a reflection more of prejudice than of intrinsic value; and who seem to believe that serious literature is by definition something whose chief purpose is to engage, in a narrowly didactic manner, the social and political issues of the day. Such writers routinely—and often without quite realizing that they are doing so—apply political terminology and ways of thinking to literary questions: they talk less about what would be artistically right to do and more about what they have a political right to do; they frown at the word "discrimination," whose political connotations make it unacceptable even when prefixed with "aesthetic"; and they shake their heads at any reference to critical standards, for "standards" is a reactionary code word and every critic a would-be censor. Edmund Wilson, once the quintessential American man of letters, died only in 1972, and yet it is hard to imagine how he (hardly a reactionary) would function in the present literary climate.

One might say the same of Randall Jarrell. When Jarrell complained in 1953 that he was living in an Age of Criticism, he didn't know how good he had it. Since then, criticism has become increasingly institutionalized, with the consequence that the sort of criticism he practiced—committed, independent, intelligent—is now a marginal, embattled enterprise. Literary criticism today takes two common forms: the dull theory-mongering of the tenure-hungry prof and the shallow praise of the middlebrow reviewer, who is unlikely to hold literary works up to the highest standard and who (even if he doesn't express it to himself in so many words) may well see himself less as a critic than as a consumer guide or an associate publicist. The poet-critics and novelist-critics of earlier generations have had few successors; partly because they are wary of offending colleagues who may someday be in a position to give them grants or teaching jobs, partly because they have lost (or never gotten into) the habit of rigorous and independent critical thinking, partly because many of them think that as marginal elements of a media- and pop-culture-centered society they must stand by each other (like members of a lodge or fraternity), and partly because academic theorists have legitimized the idea that there is no such thing as objective literary merit and that negative reviews are therefore nothing more than gratuitous subjective responses, most literary writers are not only disinclined to write criticism but are also put off by the idea of *anyone* writing it.

This is particularly true of many poets, who think of poetry not as an art but as a move-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ment ("Whose side are you on?") and/or as a pure effusion of the poet's soul ("Love me, love my poems"). To write Jarrellian criticism is a violation of professional courtesy. Only the unserious can get away with strong opinions: just as the public will continue to love a corrupt politician as long as he's folksy and down to earth, so it will cheer on a sharp-tongued critic who, by adopting the glib, snide, David Lettermanish tone that pervades magazines like *Vanity Fair*, makes it clear that he doesn't really take anything very seriously. What the public *is* offended by is a critic who, out of devotion to aesthetic standards, refuses to pull punches; such an individual is widely looked upon as a spoilsport, a curmudgeon. Only in this kind of atmosphere could a fine and sensitive critic like William Pritchard write about "nasty reviewing"—as he did in *The New York Times Book Review* of May 7, 1989—as if it were a morally questionable act; though he defended it under some circumstances, one came away with the impression that it could be better understood as a facet of a reviewer's personality—a manifestation of natural combativeness or puerility—than as a justifiable rhetorical choice. It didn't occur to Pritchard to mention that there is now less honest and engaged criticism than ever before, that the practitioners of "nasty reviewing" are far outnumbered by the habitual bestowers of unearned praise; it didn't occur to him to mention that most books *are* bad, and that in a period when bad books receive more acclaim than ever—and when good books, if they do succeed in being published, are often lost in the shuffle—it can sometimes be a critic's moral obligation to be "nasty." But many literary folk do not see it this way: talking privately to some critics, one is astonished by the disparity between what they say in conversation about a given book or writer and what they say in print. *The New York Times Book Review*, by far the most influential review publication in America, customarily assigns novelists to review novelists and poets to review poets, with the result that *Times* critiques are, on the whole, kinder and gentler than they have been in decades.

Instead of an Age of Criticism, we live in an Age of Sensitivity—an age when many writers talk about themselves and one another as representatives of demographic groups, discuss literature as (above all) an expression of group consciousness and a means to group solidarity and empowerment. Many a writer has sent a story or poem to a literary magazine only to receive a form letter explaining that the next issue is closed to him because he does not belong (or, at least, does not write about belonging) to the group to which that issue will be devoted. In a typical advertisement, a periodical called *The American Voice* recently announced a special issue entitled "Silencing: On the Suppression of Writing, and Writers Who Because of Gender, Race, Class Or Sexual Preference Prejudices Have Been Suppressed, Censored Or Otherwise Silenced, By Society, Family, The Government, Etc. . . ." When a special issue is thus introduced, a critic who dares to find fault with any of its contents risks being accused of supporting the forces of suppression, in much the same way that Pulitzer Prize jurors were publicly put on notice by several black writers that if Toni Morrison's *Beloved* did not win the 1987 fiction citation they would consider the oversight a racist slur.

One need only look at the brief poetry videos that are shown on a certain PBS station in New York, or at a list of the latest winners of writers' grants from the New York State Council on the Arts or the New York Foundation for the Arts, to know that what is being rewarded, time and again, is not artistry but membership—loudly trumpeted membership—in a certified group. Or look at the 1988 second edition of the renowned *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, in which, of the newly included poets who are younger than James Tate (the youngest poet in the 1973 first edition), two are white men, three are white women (including the Leftist activist Carolyn Forché), one is a black woman, one is a woman and "a member of the Oneida tribe," one is a woman and a Pueblo Indian, two are Chicano men, one is

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a Chicana woman, one is a part-white and part-Chippewa woman, one is a Korean-American woman, one is a woman "of Native American, African, and Asian descent." A serious reader of contemporary poetry, if asked to list the fourteen best American poets younger than James Tate, might include one or two of these names; most of them, however, would never make it into such an anthology solely on merit. Their inclusion here is clearly the result not of scrupulous critical consideration but of an irresponsible game of ethnic allotment.

To an extent, the groupthink that makes possible such editorial decisions is understandable. All other things being equal, one can see why a Northumbrian, say, might be especially curious about a novel set in Northumbria, and might even derive from it a few glimmers of insight into the meaning of his identity as a Northumbrian. But if he is a sophisticated reader, one would also expect him to recognize this as a secondary-level sort of literary engagement and to be capable of distinguishing between subjective attraction and aesthetic response. For a great literary work speaks to mature readers not on the level at which they experience their sexual or ethnic identity but on the deeper level of common humanity—the level at which they contemplate love, death, sin, and the mysterious gift of life. One would think that nobody—white or black, Chippewa or Chicano—who took literature seriously could stand to see it made the subject of affirmative-action gameplaying and cultural segregationalism. And there are, in fact, many writers who do reject groupthink pigeonholing. (Who thinks of the half-Mexican Dana Gioia as a Hispanic Poet? Or of Cynthia Ozick as a Woman Writer?) Yet this kind of seriousness is a dwindling commodity in today's literary world. At a time when fewer young Americans than ever are capable readers and fewer still seem to understand why literature matters, more and more of them are being trained in Women's Lit and Black Lit and Chicano Lit courses to focus upon secondary aspects of works that have been chosen less for their aesthetic value than for their suitability to groupthink-oriented study. Meanwhile, the spread of such phenomena as women's bookstores, reading series devoted exclusively to "Third World short stories" or "poetry by lesbians of color," and publishing imprints restricted to gay novels help to get almost everyone, young and old, used to the idea that this is the way literature should be ordered.

Once again, however, "almost everyone" is not a lot of people. The overwhelming majority of Americans are, if anything, more indifferent than ever to literary matters; though they have more leisure time (and more college degrees) than ever, fewer of them are in the habit of spending that time with a book. Why is this so? Well, literature addresses serious questions; but America is full of young people—and, increasingly, not-so-young people—whose peaceful and prosperous suburban lives have protected them from many of the uglier aspects of existence that raise those serious questions, and who thus often fail to *get* the idea of literature. Weaned on MTV and video games, moreover, these young people have grown up with minimal attention spans and hardly any intellectual self-discipline, and thus simply don't have the patience to read a novel. Nor does it help that their school primers, devised by educational theorists, are masterpieces of dullness; it is not hard to imagine many a child's passion for reading being blunted by their pallid prose, carefully limited vocabularies, pat object lessons, and blandly inoffensive characters. The upshot, in any event, is that many bright young people cannot understand literature as anything other than an inferior sort of diversion.

And yet one sign of the narcissism of the age is that while fewer young people are reading literature, more of them than ever want to be writers. If the number of students seeking Ph.D.s in English has plummeted, enrollment in creative-writing programs has soared. Thanks to these programs, the average writer now learns his craft in workshops at one university and goes on to support himself by teaching workshops at

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

another university. It's a remarkable system —and the most remarkable thing about it is that the young writers take it entirely for granted: a writer, to their way of thinking, is by definition what one becomes after one has gone through a program and received a degree. Writing has become a *profession*, one that growing numbers of young people decide upon not because they have a literary vocation but because, like many medical or dental students, they've made a career choice. Few of these writers seem driven to find a unique voice, to convey a sensibility, to aim for greatness; on the contrary, their goal often appears to be to sound as much as possible like everyone else.

In short, they produce workshop fiction. They fabricate stories packed with pop-culture references and domestic details, and composed in a numbing series of simple declarative sentences that have no more wit or passion or personality than a Muzak arrangement. And they write novels that are made up of related stories; novels consisting of unconnected episodic fragments; novels without novel-sized ideas or visions or ambitions. That's what's missing, mostly, from all these works—ambition. Not a lust for success (that's present in spades), but ambition in the best and truest sense of the word: a dominating passion to create great art. Season after season commercial publishers—who have their own reasons for playing it safe—snap up the most accomplished of these novels: not those that evince stunning originality or brilliance, but those whose authors are skillful enough to have mastered the minimalistic modalities of mainstream workshop prose. During the past few years an era of would-be Great American Novels, presided over for decades by the likes of Bellow, Mailer, Roth, Styron, and Updike —who, for all their respective follies, could at least be recognized by their prose styles —has begun to give way to an era dominated by workshop alumni, who offer less variety in tone and rhythm and diction than a roomful of Elvis impersonators.

Meanwhile, spurred by demand—not from readers, but from short-story writers for whom publication is the road to tenure—literary magazines have proliferated, from New York-based quarterlies like *Grand Street* to university-affiliated periodicals like *The Gettysburg Review*, from verse-oriented magazines to eclectic independent reviews. While some of these publications are responsibly edited, lend energy and color to the literary scene, and fill a real need in an age when few general magazines publish fiction or poetry, most exist largely to serve the vanity of their editors or of the mediocre avant-garde cliques whose work they print, and their sheer profusion simply makes literature look silly. The same holds for small presses: many are expendable, while some have served literature admirably at a time when major houses are increasingly wary of poetry and literary fiction. (One thinks particularly of the late lamented North Point Press, whose distinguished list included such writers as Evan S. Connell and Wendell Berry.) Unarguably, these are grim times for American literary publishing. First-rate novels from Great Britain, Canada, and Australia still stand a chance of being published here (particularly if they've won prizes back home), as do books by authors with impressive sales records; but many a gifted young American novelist who has made an unwise strategic choice—writing complex sentences, trafficking in ideas, setting his story in another century or outside of approved territory (e.g., in a rectory)—finds himself being rejected by major houses and being advised by his agent to try a small press or an English publisher. Yet every season, along with the self-help books, how-to manuals, astrology guides, and movie-star memoirs that have come to dominate their lists, those same major houses will publish a few first novels, mostly by workshop-bred writers, one or two of whom will—for a variety of literary and extra-literary reasons —be selected for star treatment: record-breaking (and headline-making) advances, newspaper ads that Roth or Updike might envy, and a hyperbolic press release.

All sorts of factors can enter into a pub-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lisher's decision to give a new writer the star treatment. It didn't hurt, for instance, that Ethan Canin, whose 1988 short-story collection *Emperor of the Air* received some of the best publicity in recent years, was a student at Harvard Medical School. That's the sort of detail that causes a young writer to stand out in the eyes of an acquisitions editor; it makes him Interesting Copy for magazine and Sunday-supplement profiles. Extreme youth doesn't hurt either. "If only you were twenty-three and not twenty-seven," one author reported being told by an editor who rejected his novel. Yet another factor is photogenicity: an unusually attractive writer is more likely to be tapped for a photo in *Vanity Fair* or *GQ* or *Elle*, and it is believed that a pretty face on a dustjacket or in an ad helps sell books. At a writer's conference a couple of years ago, an editor appeared on a panel along with a handsome young chap whose first novel he had recently seen through publication. The editor explained that he had been undecided about accepting the book and had therefore asked to meet the writer in person. "As soon as I got a look at him," the editor said, "I *knew* we had to take the book." (A photograph of the open-shirted author fills the back jacket cover.)

What do such considerations have to do with writing? Not much. But they have a great deal to do with the ways in which many young adults decide what to read. Even those who have gone to college, developed a reading habit, consider themselves genuinely interested in literature, and know that Judith Krantz and Sidney Sheldon are subliterary—but who (truth to tell) don't have the time or inclination to concentrate on serious fiction and are really less interested in having a cultural experience than in knowing what's hot and what's not—are likely to be seen on the subway or on the beach perusing novels that they first read about in some glossy, trend-setting magazine. (Or, perhaps, lapping up the lurid details of some author's life—for these days literary biography is a hotter commodity than literature, and many a publishing house that hesitates to take on top-drawer literary fiction is more than eager to publish gossipy tomes about third-rate scribblers of yore.)

Make no mistake: most of the hot young writers of recent years—from David Leavitt and Susan Minot to Michael Cunningham and John Burnham Schwartz—have considerable talent. But one cannot help feeling that they have been rewarded less for having talent than for having tamed it, put it on a leash, and taught it the right tricks. Reading a writer like Michael Chabon or Walter Kirn or David Lipsky, one can almost visualize the contours of the full-blooded story that wants to burst out of the straitjacket of his prose, can almost feel his emotions and visions tugging at him, trying to wrench him loose from his moorings. Though these young writers have been celebrated (often justly) for their sensitivity, wisdom, and devotion to the idea of family, their fictions—which tend to be about callow young protagonists, mainly writerly types, from whom the authors fail to distance themselves sufficiently—are just not different enough from one another. There's something naïve and narcissistic, too, about their work: several of them come off as pampered suburban children who blame their parents for making them grow up, and whose chief concern is to celebrate their alter egos' ability to "cope," to "connect," and to have successful "relationships." (There have been a couple of other hot fictional modes in recent years—the decadent-young-urbanite novels of Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney, Tama Janowitz, et al., and the deliberately ridiculous and disjointed anti-stories, à la Gordon Lish, by writers like Lorrie Moore and Amy Hempel—but one senses, especially after the *American Psycho* debacle, that these hip modes are on the way out.)

Once upon a time, words like "loyalty" and "honor" were used routinely when people spoke of literary publishing. No more. Long-term author-publisher relations built on mutual respect—and on the mutual expectation that a superior writer will eventually find an audience—are largely a thing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the past. As David Streitfeld wrote in a recent *New York* magazine piece on Random House, "Anne Tyler was willing to wait eighteen years and nine books before she had a first printing larger than 12,500 copies. Authors and agents aren't that patient anymore." David Leavitt made headlines a while back when he deserted Knopf, the publisher that had made him famous, for a better deal elsewhere. Yet Knopf may have had the last laugh in this case, for one by one the Leavitts and Ellises and McInerneys are proving to be not just ordinary literary stars but supernovas, shining resplendently for a moment and then fading steadily, their second and third and fourth books dragging them down to oblivion with a sort of grand historical inevitability; there is no reason to believe that the younger authors who have taken their places in the literary firmament will not end up the same way.

What hope, then, for literary fiction in the Nineties? In separate *New York Times* articles in the spring of 1989, both Caryn James and Michiko Kakutani proclaimed the arrival of a generation of "post-minimalistic" storytellers. Celebrating such "new realistic novels" as Douglas Bauer's *Dexterity*, Mary McGarry Morris's *Vanished*, and Richard Russo's *The Risk Pool*, Miss James announced that these books are "virtual rebuttals of the minimalists' shallow world of pop-culture references." But her explanation of the difference between these books and those of the Leavitts and Minots is unconvincing: in *Dexterity*, a character may sit in front of the television like his minimalist counterparts, yet "we never hear what he watches. But we can name the places on Myles's main street, as Ed 'headed down Summit toward Tommy Beener's garage, his lunch pail in his hand,' and 'passed Sampson's Grocery, Dee's Luncheonette, the other shabby storefronts.'" James's insistence notwithstanding, however, this sounds awfully like Ann Beattie. These writers may in fact be producing admirable books, but dramatic reactions to today's slight fictions they're not; nor do they seem to portend major literary achievements.

There is reason, though, to keep hope alive for a *fin-de-siècle* literary revolution. The last few years have seen the arrival (often with little fanfare) of some very promising novelists—among them Brett Laidlaw, Charlie Smith, and Matthew Stadler—who display not only an uncommon gift for intense, lyrical, stylistically distinctive prose but passion, intelligence, independence of mind, and indifference to literary fashion. (Two others who might have been named here, Robert Ferro and John Fox, have died of AIDS.) Tom Wolfe's bestselling *The Bonfire of the Vanities* pleasantly surprised many readers who had forgotten how colorful a novel can be, how broad a canvas it can coherently cover, and how perceptive and recognizable a picture it can render of life in a given place and time; perhaps the example of Wolfe's success will ease the publication, in the coming decade, of equally large and ambitious works. The past three or four years, moreover, have seen a handful of debut novels that are long and complex, that feature symbolism and narrative innovations, and that seek to create believable characters, to make grand statements about our era and culture, and to convey a mature vision of the human condition. Though most of them bear marks of overambition (which is, in any event, a refreshing departure from the underambition of the minimalists), these books—among them *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* by Richard Powers, *The Twenty-seventh City* by Jonathan Franzen, *The World as I Found It* by Bruce Duffy, and *The Broom of the System* by David Foster Wallace—bode well for Nineties fiction. Though, in their fascination with such subjects as modern philosophy, quantum physics, and the effects of twentieth-century science on civilization, the authors of some of these books are reminiscent of Thomas Pynchon and other metafictionists, their books are non-academic, aimed at the general reader; their precursors include Joyce, Dreiser, Orwell, and Dos Passos.

One of the most auspicious literary developments—and perhaps the most astonishing as well, given the near-absence from

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Eighties lit of anything that one could describe as metaphysical reflectiveness—is the appearance of several novels whose publication would seem to indicate that, as this tormented century approaches its end, serious American writers are once again not only inclined but permitted to concentrate intelligently upon such themes as sin, grace, and religious belief. Among these books are David Plante's *The Accident*, a story about a teenager who, at once unable to believe fully in God and incapable of shaking Him from the center of his consciousness, examines himself with a severe moral eye, at times "realiz[ing] fully that I belonged to God, . . . that my life wasn't mine but God's"; Anne Tyler's *Saint Maybe*, whose protagonist, also a teenager, is driven by family tragedy to a life of Christian devotion and self-sacrifice; Fernanda Eberstadt's *Isaac and His Devils*, wherein the eponymous hero—yet another teenager—defends religion in arguments with his Harvard classmates: "Without God, without faith, without an afterlife and immortality of the soul, death's a forbidden subject, old age is a kind of incriminating breach of etiquette, and mere animal existence, racking up year after youthful year, becomes an absolute value"; and Mark Helprin's *A Soldier of the Great War*, in which an elderly professor of aesthetics shares with a young stranger the lessons of his crowded, colorful life, all relating to the nexus among God and love and beauty: "each and every instance of beauty is a promise and example, in miniature, of life that can end in balance, with symmetry, purpose, and hope—even if without explanation. Beauty has no explanation, but its right perfection elicits love. . . . [A]ll the hard and wonderful things of the world are nothing more than a frame for a spirit, like fire and light, that is the endless roiling of love and grace. I can tell you only that beauty cannot be expressed or explained in a theory or an idea, that it moves by its own law, that it is God's way of comforting his broken children."

None of these novels lacks shortcomings. Simply by acknowledging the Big Themes that have animated all great literature, however, they soar above the shallow level at which most American literary fiction operates nowadays. Their authors know what should be at stake in a novel; each of them reminds us what we have been missing in an era when the imperatives of art have more frequently than ever given way to a multitude of extra-aesthetic considerations. It is in such writers—and in every writer of intelligence, originality, and high moral seriousness—that we must place our hope for the Republic of Letters in the century's last decade.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Rimbaud, the anarchic demiurge

by John Simon

Arthur Rimbaud was the begetter of modern poetry. For it to come to pass, a Rimbaud was required. It did not have to be A. Rimbaud; it could have been a Rimbaud of some other name, in some other place. But in the event, it was this Jean Nicolas Arthur Rimbaud, born in Charleville in the Ardennes on October 20, 1854, and dead on November 10, 1891—in pain and wretchedness, with one leg and all his hopes amputated—that is the fountainhead of modern poetry as we know it. (There is also, to some extent, Stéphane Mallarmé, about whom later.) And he did it all before he fully grew up, after which he rejected literature, his own and everyone else's, forever.

Between the ages of sixteen and somewhere between twenty and twenty-five, Rimbaud conducted all the experiments, made all the discoveries, raised all the questions modern poetry needed to accost. We are still stumbling along in his deep footprints in this year of 1991, when you cannot walk a few blocks in New York City without seeing the name of Mozart, another *Wunderkind* and anniversary boy, plastered all over: Mozart this and Mozart that. But where is Rimbaud in evidence—in books or bookstore windows, magazines or newspapers, lecture halls or cabarets—where?

In France, as might be expected, the situation is somewhat better. Thus the April 4-10 issue of *Le Nouvel Observateur* was a special Rimbaud number, containing several informative articles, critiques, inquiries, and even a quiz and a news story from Japan, where Rimbaud was helping advertise Suntory whiskey. One of the most useful pieces was the last one, a selection of quotations from nine distinguished and concerned writers looking back at Rimbaud—or, in the case of Mallarmé, across, for the two were contemporaries. The quotations are suggestive, although short and, in most cases, undated, which makes it harder to assess their literary-historical significance. I shall, however, use them as points of departure and reference in a further survey of Rimbaud's achievement and influence, both from my own and other observers' vantage points.

The best way to start, however, is with another item in the *Observateur*, a mini-interview given by Michel Butor, "le maître du nouveau roman." Butor tells how, already as a *lycéen*, he was inspired by Rimbaud first to write "spontaneous poetry," later also "constructed texts." "My verbal alchemy [*alchimie du verbe*, Rimbaud's famous phrase]," Butor says, "stems from the *Illuminations.* Thanks to it, I wrote what I would never have dared to write before."

Rimbaud has, indeed, been an influence not only on subsequent poets, but also—and this is extremely rare, perhaps unique—on prose writers. His contribution was to go from formal verse, often in alexandrines, to newer and looser forms of rhymed verse, thence to *vers libre*, which was an innovation even though, in America, Walt Whitman had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

published *Leaves of Grass*, his version of free verse, as early as 1855. But though samples of this had been published in French by the 1870s, Whitman did not make himself felt as an influence in France till after Rimbaud. Finally, Rimbaud moved on to his most important achievement, the poems in prose of *Les Illuminations*, putting the prose poem as an art form indelibly on the map.

To be sure, the prose poem as a conscious poetic genre had existed since Baudelaire's *Le Spleen de Paris*, published posthumously in 1869; as an unconscious manifestation, it dates back to the works of Louis (Aloysius) Bertrand and Maurice de Guérin, from *circa* 1830 and 1835, respectively. But what Rimbaud produced, most likely between 1873 and 1875, was something very idiosyncratic and different even from Baudelaire's well-behaved little poetic anecdotes and sketches in their only slightly heightened prose. For —need I remind you?—Rimbaud set out to realize a bold literary and existential program that he formulated in two famous letters of May 1871—at age sixteen! According to it, the poet has to turn himself into a *voyant* (seer) by "a long, immense, and systematic *dérèglement* [derailing, disarray] of all the senses," whereby, at enormous personal cost, he becomes "the great invalid [*malade*], the great criminal, the great damned soul [*maudit*]—and the supreme Scientist."

Why scientist? Because, delving into the unknown, the poet brings back what he has seen there, formed or unformed, as he found it. The goal would be nothing less than a universal language of soul to soul. The program included the liberation of women, too, into poet-seers; and poetry would no longer merely translate action into rhythms: it would *be out ahead*. (Italics Rimbaud's.) While awaiting this, we should demand from the poet the *new* in ideas and forms, but not the way the Romantics understood this. As Rimbaud said in *Une Saison en enfer*, "One must be absolutely modern."

The last and most mature works of Rimbaud's, then, are the prose poems of *Les Illuminations*, a title that did not mean for him mystical illuminations (he had gotten over that stage), but, as in English (he was in England then), medieval illuminated initials, or simply colored plates. Just how did Rimbaud work this, his last and best *alchimie du verbe*, to use the term he coined in his autobiographical and transitional work, *Une Saison en enfer*? The easiest way to convey it is by transcribing one of the shortest and loveliest poems from the *Illuminations*, "Départ" (Departure).

Assez vu. La vision s'est rencontrée à tous
les airs.
Assez eu. Rumeurs des villes, le soir,
et au soleil, et toujours.
Assez connu. Les arrêts de la vie.
—O Rumeurs et Visions!
Départ dans l'affection et le bruit neufs.

I translate:

Seen enough. The vision met itself in all airs.
Had enough. Rustle of cities, in the evening,
in the sunlight, and always.
Known enough. The stoppages [decrees?]
of life.—O Rustlings and Visions!
Departure amid new affection and noise.

This, by the way, is one of the tamer and easier pieces of the collection. Its *versets* (as the French call lines that are longer than single verses normally are, but shorter than prose paragraphs) are brief enough for *vers libre* rather than prose poetry. But we can see here clearly some of the Rimbaldian strategies and innovations. First, a very stripped-down language, a sort of telegraphese. (The opposite—baroque—can also be found in Rimbaud.) Second, a prevailing ambiguity because words in a vague, even cryptic, context do not have single indisputable meanings. Thus the *airs* of line one can mean (1) weather, breeze, atmosphere; (2) tune, melody; (3) facial expression, demeanor. In this particular instance (1) seems likeliest, but even here one cannot be sure; besides, Rimbaud may have wanted to play on two, or all three, meanings. In line three, *arrêts* is a word with four principal meanings: (1)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stops, stoppages; (2) decrees, judgments; (3) seizures, impoundings; (4) arrests. Given the rather nebulous context, any one may be right, though, again, (1) seems likeliest.[1]

Clearly, this is a poem that creates more mood and music than meaning. Still, as an example of the things people project onto Rimbaud, consider Robert Greer Cohn in his *The Poetry of Rimbaud* (Princeton, 1973): "The title has the transparent sound of *ar*, echoed in the 'airs' . . . It is like the airy space over railroad tracks as one is about to go away," etc., all of which is pure hogwash. Wallace Fowlie (*Rimbaud's Illuminations*, London, 1953) thinks that the poem is "the announcement of the new mystical experience, the 'affection' . . . that of pure being, and the 'noise' . . . the wings of the new power of movement." Unsupported and arbitrary daydreaming. Far more sensible is the view of H. de Bouillane de Lacoste (*Rimbaud et le problème des Illuminations*, Paris, 1949) that the poem "in its laconism, announces a change of existence on which the poet congratulates himself." The late scholar Suzanne Bernard merely observes that the poem seems to mark Rimbaud's trip to London; this time, let me add, not with the tiresome old lover Verlaine, but with a new friend—perhaps platonic, perhaps not—the painter-poet Germain Nouveau.

But for all the "reality" in the poem, there is also a great deal of deliberate obscurity. What is this vision that has met up with itself in all airs? And just what would make an inveterate city dweller say he has had enough of the murmur of cities? Why, in fact, is sound described as a possession? Although the poem seems deceptively simple, Suzanne Bernard is quite right to insist (in her splendid doctoral thesis, *Le Poème en prose de Baudelaire jusqu'à nos jours*, Paris, 1959) that this poem, for all its relative coherence and conformity, is still much closer to the rest of the collection than to academic poetry: "The concentration, the terse formulations of 'Départ,' its sudden cessation with two accented monosyllables [most unusual in French], all this displays Rimbaud's trademark—and what stylist would dare write 'Assez eu,' would dare bracket 'l'affection et le bruit neufs'?"

In the same year (1959) that Mme Bernard submitted her thesis to the Sorbonne, I handed in my much more modest one to Harvard's Department of Comparative Literature. Mine, *The Prose Poem as Genre in Nineteenth-Century European Literature*, was a mere 721 typewritten pages, and was not published until 1987, by Garland Publishing, in facsimile. Mme Bernard's 797 Royal Octavo pages in ten-point Long Primer (not to mention the proliferating footnotes in seven-point Minion) were published immediately and deservedly. About "Départ," she doesn't have much to say, yet this piece, to return to the *Observateur*, is clearly what inspired Butor. In the *Illuminations*, he explains, "it is not the end that repeats, but the beginning: rhyme is reversed. . . . This repetition, combined with a perfect typographical alignment, produces a strong visual impression. Sentences are thus concatenated, like variations. Like Schoenberg. . . . In *Passing Time*, to frame the text and facilitate its reading, I introduced a system of *versets*. I divided every sentence into several paragraphs that begin the same way, like Rimbaud. . . . One can even say that *Mobile* was one single giant sentence. . . . The composition of *Mobile*, then, is inspired by the prosody of *Illuminations*."

But about that initial rhyme: it does not occur anywhere in the forty-odd pieces of the *Illuminations* except in "Départ." Even anaphora, the repetition of an opening word or words, is rare, occurring only in three or four other poems here. Yet this device so impressed Butor that he perceived it as a major component of Rimbaud's style. But, then, such is Rimbaud's spell that even his less fre-

1 Benjamin Britten has beautifully set eight of Rimbaud's poems in his *Illuminations*, Opus 18. I have compared the translations of "Les arrêts de la vie" in the booklets of my four CD versions of the work. Two have "Life's decrees," one "Life's constraints," one "Life's sentences." Wallace Fowlie, in his translation of the *Illuminations*, offers "Life's haltings."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

quent strategies can deeply affect a sensitive reader. Certainly those *-u* rhymes are striking; I'd like to think that they inspired Mallarmé's "A la nue accablante tu." And, as Mme Bernard notes, "Assez eu" is very much out of the ordinary.

Most immediately striking about "Départ," though, is that it contains no imagery. There is no simile, no personification, no metaphor even, unless "La vision s'est rencontrée à tous les airs" is one. But it must be grasped that *vision* can mean "my faculty of sight" or sight in some general sense, involving all the people of the city or, just as readily, some manner of hallucination (but what, exactly?), or it can be Rimbaud's visionary capacity as such. It is safest to paraphrase the opening sentence as "I have had enough of seeing: there has been so much of it that the air has become stale from all my looking, that my own eyes are looking back at me from every point." This would constitute hyperbole; but is it really what Rimbaud meant? There is not enough context to corroborate or negate it.

Next, could "rumeurs de la ville" have a relatively positive value, as in the English "babbling" of both brooks and people content at their outdoor *badinage*, the latter being the metropolitan equivalent of country sounds: in the evening, at sidewalk tables; in the sunshine, as the citizenry rattles about; and then that casual afterthought, "et toujours," and always, anytime. (But certainly not Fowlie's poeticizing "forever," which, in any case, would presuppose "à jamais" in the original.) This could then lead into "les arrêts de la vie"—the dawdlings of life, the evenings of getting drunk, the noons when one is sacked out. And then the capitalized "O Rumeurs et Visions!"—perhaps glimpses of a new life elsewhere with a deeper meaning.

And the new affection and sounds? Well, yes, it could be Germain Nouveau, a new companion with whom Rimbaud was uncomplicatedly comfortable, rather than sadomasochistically embroiled, as with Verlaine. Thus far in the poem sounds were *rumeurs*; now they are *bruits*, something more assertive and virile—a more masculine relationship perhaps. And affection of any kind might well be a new thing for Arthur, whose strongest emotion hitherto had been his hatred for his strict, miserly, fanatically pious mother, a hypocrite and worldly-success-craving peasant, Rimbaud's curse and—muse. For without the need to escape Vitalie Cuif Rimbaud, as his father did when Arthur was still a small child, and without the equally compelling urge to flee the oppressively bourgeois atmosphere of Charleville, Rimbaud might still conceivably have become a poet, but not *this* poet.

Now to an early voice in the *Observateur*'s collage. In 1912, writing the introduction to an edition of Rimbaud's poems, Paul Claudel, who was converted to Christianity by his reading of Rimbaud, calls him "Un mystique à l'état sauvage," a mystic in the savage (primitive) state. For most of the Catholic literati—Claudel, Mauriac, Rivière, Daniel-Rops—Rimbaud's deathbed conversion to Christianity was a fact, on the authority of Isabelle, who nursed her big brother Arthur through his final phase. But Isabelle was, like her mother, a peasant, as Rimbaud, though he once called himself so, was not. And Isabelle, pious like her mother, was desperate to whitewash Arthur in the eyes of God and the world.

Yet hardly any serious scholar now believes in that conversion. In his agony, with one leg amputated, the cancer spreading through his body, the pain intense, the mind unclear, Rimbaud muttered all sorts of things. As Pierre Petitfils explains in his authoritative *Rimbaud*, hydrarthosis was aggravated by remnants of syphilis, and rheumatism degenerated into synovitis, then into sarcoma and, in due time, carcinoma: "It is probable that by the time he left Harar, Rimbaud was already beyond cure: the disease met no resistance in that undernourished, overworked, exhausted organism." But Arthur never received extreme unction because, as Alain Borer reminds us in his *Observateur* essay, he kept spitting and accusing the hospital orderlies and even the nuns of choice abominations.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In any case, as Borer points out, Rimbaud's life and work radically defied any religion preaching salvation and an afterlife. Yet even the Muslims have made a bid for Rimbaud's soul because, dying, he muttered some Mohammedan formulas. And it is also true that during his years as a trader in Africa, he adopted some Muslim ways—names, clothes, manners (such as squatting to urinate)—which were the means to prosperity, indeed mere survival, in those parts. Instead of "mystique à l'état sauvage" Claudel should have said "mystique *de* l'état sauvage," the mystic of the savage state, the fellow whose passion for naïve and wild ways elevates them into a kind of mystique. The boy who wrote "Merde à Dieu" on the walls and benches of Charleville lost all interest in God when he became a gunrunner in Abyssinia, and indifference is a more potent weapon than hatred.

The Surrealist Tristan Tzara summed it up neatly: "Rimbaud is childhood expressing itself by means of violating [*transgresser*] its condition." [2] That *transgresser* is a superb choice: transgress with a hint of transcend about it. And Tzara elaborates: "He has seen, through the oblivion of each one of us, the possibilities of infringing the laws of gravity of thought, spoiled by the hardening of age . . . and that only violence can give meaning to freedom." Such mysticism has no truck with God. One of the *Observateur*'s nine sages, André Suarès, in a long-unpublished but immediate reply to Claudel & Co. (the date in the magazine, 1955, is that of posthumous publication; Suarès died in 1948), wrote: "When they dare to show us God cutting off Rimbaud's leg in order to teach him how to walk straight, and to forsake the paths of paganism to enter those of the Church, they are not only caricaturing God, they are also depicting a Rimbaud who was a stranger to Rimbaud." Which might give yet another meaning to Rimbaud's most celebrated utterance, "Je est un autre" (I is another). It is revelatory that Michel Drouin (again in the *Observateur*) quotes a 1966 article by René Etiemble stating that if Suarès had published his views back then in 1912, "I would not have had to write *Le Mythe de Rimbaud*, I would not have had to spend thirty years of my life fighting against these lies."

But Etiemble's work—comprising most significantly the two-volume *Mythe de Rimbaud* (1952 to 1970, counting various importantly revised editions); *Nouveaux Aspects du mythe de Rimbaud dans le monde communiste* (1964); the book devoted to the famous "Sonnet of the Vowels," *Le Sonnet des voyelles* (1968); and the critical study *Rimbaud*, co-written with Etiemble's wife, Yassu Gauclère (1936, but reissued with radical revisions in 1950 and 1966)—is not a mere demolition of the Christian myth. Rather, it is an attack on all Rimbaud myths. That is why Petitfils's dismissal of Etiemble, ". . . the 'Rimbaud myth' in which nobody ever believed but which a distinguished professor at the Sorbonne saw fit to demolish with the sledgehammer of 3000 printed pages," is not fair. But there is something to it. In his determination to make a kind of rationalist—or, at least, not an irrationalist—out of Rimbaud and deny him any sort of, even lay, metaphysics, Etiemble went too far. He and Gauclère speak, for example, of "the influence of choice, of intelligence, of rhetoric at the service of the passions." And, to give only one typical instance, they explain much of the *Illuminations* as recollections of the theater, "by which we gain access to the imaginary . . . [T]he multiplicity of possible décor opens up innumerable perspectives." So if Rimbaud speaks in "Enfance III" of "a lake that rises" (*un lac qui monte*), he is thinking of a stage backdrop, where perspective is achieved by making a painted lake seem to go upward.

True, but Etiemble and Gauclère disregard that *explication de texte* (which I, too, devoutly espouse) proceeds in the opposite

2 From the introduction to the 1948 Lausanne edition of Rimbaud's works. Cf. Bernard's "the art of Rimbaud consists . . . in knowing how to preserve his childlike sense of wonder from the sterilizing intellectual work of the adult, who, with his 'notions,' kills the fairy world."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

direction from poetic creation, and that explaining is not the same as explaining away. In other words, textual explication retraces the poet's steps back to the mundane beginnings of the poem, the pre-oyster grain of sand. But creation proceeds inversely toward the fabulous, the finished, the pearl. It is helpful to show whence the miracle of the poem came, but that does not do away with the undefinable, inexplicable miraculousness of it.

Which brings me to the first item in the *Observateur*'s chrestomathy: "The *Correspondence* starting with Cyprus [the first place where, having chucked poetry, Rimbaud made a sustained effort at a career in business] appears in general, to lovers of good literature, badly written, disappointing, unworthy of so great a writer. . . . We find that this style without elegance, niggardly, flat, has the same extraordinary dryness as the other, but on the plane of banality, from which one does not see why he should have deviated in writing, since such, henceforward, was his mode of life." This is from *La Part du feu* (Paris, 1949), by the important critic and novelist Maurice Blanchot. But though the statement is useful in reminding us that the so-called hallucinatory style of Rimbaud's poetry is also purposeful, polished (rather than automatic writing), "dry"—and that, in a sense, there is no break between the poet Rimbaud and the merchant Rimbaud—there is something misleading here. For Blanchot, in that same *Part du feu*, also writes, "He has pushed to the farthest extreme ambiguity, which is the essential movement of poetic activity." And earlier, in *Faux Pas* (Paris, 1943), Blanchot called Rimbaud "he who, *par excellence*, is the poet whose poetry welcomes the ineffable [*inexprimable*], who gave language the assurance of not being limited to language. . . ." If that is dryness at all, it is surely dryness of a very special kind.

And that leads us to another of the nine quoted views, this one from the poet René Char, in a prose poem first published in 1947 and reprinted in *Fureur et mystère* (1948): "You did well to leave, Arthur Rimbaud! Your eighteen years antagonistic [*réfractaires*] to friendship, to the malevolence, to the silliness of Parisian poets, as also to the murmurings, worthy of sterile bees, of your slightly demented Ardennes family, you did well to scatter them to the four winds, to throw them under the blade of their precocious guillotine. You were right to abandon the boulevard of the lazybones, the taverns of the poetry-pissers [*pisse-lyres*], for the hell of the stupid [*bêtes*], the commerce of the cunning, and the greetings [*bonjour*] of the simple." But a second quotation from Char offers only the confirmation that Rimbaud made a complete break with the past. It might have been better to quote the ending of that poem from *Fureur et mystère*: "You did well to leave, Arthur Rimbaud! There are some of us who believe without proof that happiness is possible with you." Or perhaps "who believe with you that happiness is possible."

However that conclusion is to be read, Char is here on the verge of a major insight: that the same pursuit of happiness made of Rimbaud in turn a poet and a gunrunner. Thus Tzara perceived in Rimbaud's poetry "a fevered desire to fill in *une absence*"—a lack, absence, void, or deprivation. The consistency that Blanchot detected in Rimbaud's style Char and Tzara find also in his break with the past. I submit, however, that the consistency, which many who marveled at Rimbaud's self-contradiction failed to catch at all, is of a rather different nature from what even its perceivers perceived.

Rimbaud, the child genius whose self-expression, freedom, accomplishments were suppressed by his antipathetic mother and milieu, was—always was—in search of power. Power was his true objective—a hunger, a lust for power. Only the method of acquiring that power kept changing. The first tack was that of the poet as seer, as magician or magus, to quote from that famed section of *Une Saison en enfer*, "Alchimie du verbe": "Weeping, I saw gold—but could not drink." The alchemist's pursuit is gold (potable gold in this case), which is wealth and,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in turn, power. The alchemist is the supreme magician, the supreme possessor: "I bragged of owning all possible landscapes." He becomes "the god of fire," his life is "a celebration [*fête*]." Power over words, over poetry is a way to conquer the world.

But when that power was denied him, when the small edition of *Une Saison en enfer* that he had printed at his expense was destroyed, partly by himself in disgust and partly by the printer for nonpayment of costs, power had to be sought elsewhere. Still, self-contradictory as he was, and under the brief but apparently steadying influence of Germain Nouveau, Rimbaud tried once more to write poetry, hence *Les Illuminations*. But he gave the manuscripts away and headed for the diametrically opposite method of acquiring wealth and power: commerce. Yet there is a very real sense in which opposites are the same thing—*les extrêmes se touchent*. Thus Rimbaud's preparations for material success were similar to his poetic preparations. He studied foreign languages (for which he had a prodigious talent) to make business dealings easier in much the same way he had studied French and classical tongues for his poetry; he studied scientific books and technical manuals the way he had devoured mystical and historical works; and he traveled in search of job opportunities just as he had journeyed in search of experience, discovery, knowledge.

Movement was essential to Rimbaud. Clinically, this has been diagnosed as dromomania. More lyrically, Verlaine called his lover *l'homme au semelles de vent* (the man with soles of wind), and Mallarmé dubbed him *ce passant considérable* (this passer-by of parts). But even movement, the title of one of Rimbaud's *vers libre* poems, is power: no person, no place, no entanglement can hold you so long as you keep moving. Quite rightly, in another *Observateur* piece, "Rimb on the Road," François Cavignoli compares him to real and fictional travelers, Gambetta and Phileas Fogg, and perceives in him the honcho of the Beat generation, the big brother of William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, and Neal Cassady. He was, we are told, the inventor of hitchhiking, of being publicly funded (e.g., enlisting in the Dutch army to get to Java, then promptly deserting), of taking on odd jobs to support oneself while bumming around. More important, he taught the Beats a literary style and some thematics. Take, for example, this, from Allen Ginsberg's "Howl": ". . . who sweetened the snatches of a million girls trembling in the sunset, and were red eyed in the morning but prepared to sweeten the snatch of the sunrise. . . ." Doesn't this remind you of "Aube" (Dawn): "I have kissed the summer dawn. . . . One by one, I lifted her veils. . . . Dawn and the child tumbled to the bottom of the woods. . . ." And Ginsberg's enumeration—the catalogue as a literary device—is very much out of Rimbaud ("Devotion" or "Sale," for example).

But unlike the Beats, Rimbaud did not keep moving merely to be one jump ahead of failure. Henry Miller, another of the *Observateur*'s pundits, remarks, "Whatever he did, it was always too good. They seem to have reproached the bohemian for being too bohemian, the poet for being too much a poet, the pioneer for being too much a pioneer, the businessman for being too much a businessman, the gunrunner for running guns too well. . . ." I wonder, though, who were "they"—these carpers who objected to Rimbaud's excessive skill at everything? Miller's etiology is off, but there is no doubt that Rimbaud provoked resentment for being dirty and slovenly, though his poverty had much to do with that; for being arrogant and insulting, though being an underappreciated genius could sour your disposition; for being brutal and sadistic, though he had had a pretty rotten childhood.

Rimbaud's sadism does not come out only in his life—his enjoyment of games in which he could plunge a knife in another player's outstretched hand, or his carving up his lover's thighs to the point where Verlaine had to make up stories about his limp on the occasion when he met Victor Hugo. It is there also in his poetry, in the way it mocks, misleads, leaves the reader stranded. Consider the famous *verset* from "Barbare," "Le

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pavillon en viande saignante sur la soie des mers et des fleurs arctiques; (elles n'existent pas)." *Pavillon* has two meanings: pavilion and flag. Since the line, like the entire poem, is obscure, either interpretation makes as much, or as little, sense as the other. Both readings have had their champions. Still, I propose: "The flag made of bloody meat on the silk of the seas and the arctic flowers; (they don't exist)." But there are further ambiguities here. Are both the seas and the arctic flowers silken, or only the seas? Are only the flowers nonexistent, or do neither the flowers nor the seas exist? The line tortures the reader, especially with that palinode that does not make clear just how much it retracts. Yet what a challenge to try to make some sense of it, even if, as Suzanne Bernard warns, in Rimbaud criticism everything is only hypothesis.

Nothing that Rimbaud wrote or did was as much resented as his irruption on the Verlaine household, taking Paul away from his young wife and baby, and flaunting his relationship with the older poet as the two wandered, drank, and fought all over western Europe. This brings us to the much disputed question of Rimbaud's homosexuality, which some commentators revel in, others reject, and still others embrace with major reservations. It is a matter relevant both to his poetry and to his posthumous influence.

The rejecters don't have much of a case; there are too many texts by both Rimbaud and Verlaine that spell things out. Most outspoken is Verlaine's sonnet ending with "Vers toi je rampe encore indigne. / —Monte sur mes reins et trépigne!" (I crawl toward you still unworthy. / —Mount on my loins [back] and prance!) As Petitfils ironically comments, "M. André Fontenas has some difficulty persuading one that this sonnet describes a stained glass window in which the Archangel Michael is—temporarily—brought to the ground by the devil." This is the same Verlaine who wrote to Rimbaud imploringly from London: "Je suis ton *old cunt, open* ou *opened*, je n'ai pas mes verbes irréguliers."

The tendency nowadays is to assert that, whereas Verlaine, however clandestinely, was a true homosexual, Rimbaud threw himself deliberately, programmatically into homosexuality by way of practicing the seer's disorder of the senses. Whether this is so, or whether (as I and many others believe) he was truly homosexual—and in Africa either heterosexual or bisexual—doesn't much matter. The nineteenth century was no more ready to forgive reckless displays of homosexuality in Rimbaud's France than, a bit later on, in Wilde's England. It is shocking to read that a man and writer as enlightened as Anatole France voted against admitting a submission from Verlaine to the new *Parnasse contemporain* of 1875: "the author is unworthy," France declared.

On Rimbaud's homosexuality, the *Observateur* quotes the prominent contemporary French poet Yves Bonnefoy, specifically his monograph *Rimbaud par lui-même* (Paris, 1961; English translation, by Paul Schmidt, New York, 1972): "It is certain that his homosexuality was deep-seated, and although it is also true that he did not consider it a moral flaw, he nevertheless described it, not without distress, as the fiasco [*catastrophe*] of the other [i.e., heterosexual] love. . . . Homosexuality remains, in his view, a negative passion, a deprivation, a defeat." (My translation, slightly different from Schmidt's.) If Bonnefoy is right, we have yet another factor that skewed Rimbaud's vision—felicitously—even as the need to escape his background did: the sense of dissatisfaction with the self, and so the urge to flee from the enemy within as well as from the one without. To the need for power is added the need for flight, the two combining into some of Rimbaud's richest poetry.

One escapes from oneself *into* poetry and hopes it will make one famous, rich, and powerful; when this fails to happen, one escapes *from* poetry—into commerce or science—with the same expectations. Or, as Bonnefoy puts it elsewhere in his book (known simply as *Rimbaud* in English): "Rimbaud stopped writing when the end of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

childhood, more compelling than any intellectual decision, deprived him of the hope that he could *change life*." (Translation Schmidt's, italics Bonnefoy's.)

No, he couldn't change life, but he could and did change poetry. The Surrealists recognized him as their precursor, mentor, and presiding divinity until André Breton, their pope, reversed himself in that famous encyclical, the Second Surrealist Manifesto, in a passage included among the *Observateur*'s critical texts: "Rimbaud erred, Rimbaud tried to trick us. He is guilty in our eyes of having allowed, of not having rendered wholly impossible, certain tarnishing [*déshonorantes*] interpretations of his thought, of the Claudel variety." This is misleading. For a long time, Breton revered Rimbaud. It is possible, though, that just as the poet's annexation by a rival church infuriated Breton, Arthur's manifest homosexuality also displeased the very heterosexual Surrealist. Ironically, the pope's new god, Lautréamont, may well have been even more homosexual. But he was discreet about it: the celebrated passage about pederasts in *Maldoror* is grotesque and elegiac by turns, and not at all realistic like certain passages in *Une Saison en enfer* and *Les Illuminations*.

It is entirely possible that the radical loosening up of French poetry by Rimbaud—like the analogous process initiated in America by Whitman—has much to do with the poet's sexual orientation. If one studies "Délires I" in *Saison* and "Vagabonds" from the *Illuminations* carefully, one can see the connection between the "drôle de ménage" Rimbaud-Verlaine and the kind of poetry that emerged from it. It didn't have to, of course; Verlaine's was never radical. But it could—did—from Rimbaud's particular genius. Consider this from "Vagabonds," about Rimbaud's escaping from one of Verlaine's late-night recriminations to the window, where "Je créais, par delà la campagne traversée par des bandes de musique rare, les fantômes du futur luxe nocturne." (I created, beyond the countryside streaked with scrolls of rare music, the phantasms of a future nocturnal splendor.) This, the poem continues, constitutes a "distraction vaguement hygiénique." Unless one interprets the passage as a mere scene of masturbation, one can view it as an escape from sexual problems into a hygienic activity, a relaxation and release—the creation of the poetry of future splendor, of *vers libre* and the prose poem, of the freedom of unfettered self-expression and damn all conventions, social, sexual, or poetic.

Sure enough, Rimbaud was to be, in times to come, often taken up by poets precisely because of his homosexuality (just as Whitman was)—most obviously by the Beats. A number of scholars and critics, too, have been drawn to him for that reason, most conspicuously those who carry on about his supposed "angelism." Some angel, Arthur Rimbaud!

Yet Rimbaud cannot reasonably be blamed for what others, imitators or interpreters, do to him, although even Claudel, as he wrote Gide, was to be revolted by the detritus littering Rimbaud's heritage—"like a beautiful, artistic place," Claudel complained, "where one finds empty sardine cans." But, as I have said on many an occasion, Claudel was just as guilty of leaving not a few empty holy-water bottles lying about. Nevertheless, the work of sundry commentators is not unhelpful, especially if one admits with Blanchot—and my thesis—that, on top of the obscurity, there is much deliberate ambiguity in Rimbaud. This was also recognized by Gide in the *Feuillets d'automne*, where he endorses not only divergent but also downright contradictory interpretations. Etiemble promptly takes issue with this, there being among the French a great need to *believe* in rationality, Cartesian clarity, unequivocalness even in their poets, even if such a belief in Rimbaud's case requires Olympian mental gymnastics. Thus Yves Bonnefoy, years ago, after sympathetically exploring my then views on Rimbaud, disagreed, claiming that ambiguity was something very un-French, and had not entered French poetry until Valéry, who got it from foreign sources. More recently, during a very brief chat with Bonnefoy, he seemed to indi-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cate that he had somewhat modified his position, though we did not get a chance to pursue the matter.

What further clouds the Rimbaud inheritance is that it has often been betrayed by translators, and not only where it is impossible to know just what Rimbaud meant, but also in the instances where his meaning ought to be unmistakable. Thus the poem "Dévotion," which catalogues various kinds of devotion and dedication, ends with "A tout prix et avec tous les airs, même dans des voyages métaphysiques.—Mais plus *alors.*" (At all costs, and with all airs [?], even on metaphysical journeys.—But no longer *then.*) Clearly, these devotions must be pursued to their metaphysical consummations. But then there can be an end to it. Yet Wallace Fowlie translates, "But no more *thens*," for which the French would have to be "mais plus d'*alors.*" And Louise Varèse has "But even more *then*," which would require "mais encore plus *alors*" in the text. There is, to be sure, something obfuscatory about this curious ending with its odd italicization of one word; no wonder the worthy Bouillane de Lacoste exclaimed that it "smells of mystification a mile off." Still, that is no excuse for mistranslations, which unfortunately abound in renderings of Rimbaud. Etiemble adduces veritable Tartar hordes of them, often on the order of "jalousie pour les mendiants" (envy of beggars) Englished as "venetian blinds behind which beggars are hiding."

Let us consider one more, short but typical, piece from the *Illuminations*, "Antique," which can mean antique or antiquity:

> Gracieux fils de Pan! Autour de ton front couronné de fleurettes et de baies tes yeux, des boules précieuses, remuent. Tachées de lie brune, tes joues se creusent. Tes crocs luisent. Ta poitrine ressemble à une cithare, des tintements circulent dans tes bras blonds. Ton coeur bat dans ce ventre où dort le double sexe. Promène-toi, la nuit, en mouvant doucement cette cuisse, cette seconde cuisse et cette jambe de gauche. [3]

The assumption is that Rimbaud is describing the statue of a satyr seen in a museum, and that he mistakenly supposed that, what with their goat's feet, satyrs were descended from Pan. The revolving eyes seem to prefigure modern sculpture (Pol Bury), but are presumably self-induced hallucinations. "Spotted with brown dregs" suggests, perhaps, a painting rather than a sculpture; but "joues se creusent" may well be an echo effect, a rhyme on "boules précieuses." Fauns do not have fangs, but Rimbaud's savage imagination creates them, with the sound of "lie brune" and "creusent" leading into "crocs" and "luisent." I doubt if a satyr's chest would look like a zither, but Rimbaud, excelling in classics, may have been thinking of Mount Cithaeron, where Actaeon was torn to pieces by the fangs (*crocs*) of his own hounds, and Cithaeron then suggested "cithare." The rippling muscles would evoke tinklings; the brown lees, by contrast, blond flesh. The heart (emotion) is to be conjoined with sexuality, hence heart and genitalia meet in the middle ground of the belly. The belly also suggests a drum for the heart to beat on. Is androgyny implied by "double sex"? Or is it that the phallus and the scrotum, sculptured, look like the same organ in duplicate? If Rimbaud is visiting a museum, he may imagine the statue coming to life after dark, when no one is around. Or he may extend to all-day the god Pan's famous noontime siesta. The three legs may have to do with Rimbaud's looking (as Pierre Arnoult put forward) at a statue of a centaur. Or could the third limb be the penis? Some legs don't tread the ground, they *trépignent* on someone's backside.

"Antique" is more characteristic of prose poetry than "Départ," with which we began:

---

3 Graceful son of Pan! Around your brow crowned with flowerlets and berries your eyes, precious balls, move. Spotted with brown dregs, your cheeks are hollowed. Your fangs glisten. Your chest resembles a zither, tinklings circulate through your blond arms. Your heart beats in that belly where sleeps the double sex. Walk about at night, by gently moving this thigh, this second thigh, and this left leg.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it is printed as an uninterrupted piece of prose. Taken together, the two represent fairly Rimbaud's technique. "Départ" is disjointed, working by discontinuities or leaps; "Antique" seems to hang together, but conveys a figure, a situation that cannot be fully grasped. Each poem shimmers between lucidity and opacity. As Roger Shattuck observed in his review of two of Fowlie's works on Rimbaud,[4] "In the *Illuminations* a totally hallucinated universe becomes indistinguishable from a literally noted sensuous realism." Rimbaud, Shattuck writes, "welded together popular and poetic language at the precise moment when Mallarmé was carefully taking them apart." So of the two great founders of poetic modernism, it was Rimbaud who more or less prevailed, because his mode is, or seems, easier to imitate. Perhaps the best definition of Rimbaud's procedure can be found in Castex and Surer's manual for nineteenth-century studies: "What Rimbaud sees, he transfigures; what he doesn't, he creates."

This isn't to everybody's taste. The novelist and traveler Victor Ségalen (1878-1919) is quoted as follows by the *Observateur*:

> Many pages in Rimbaud's work remain inert for us. Neither the beauty of the vocables nor the riches of cadence [*nombre*], nor the unforeseen in the thrust [*volte*] of the images, nothing manages to move us, even though everything in this prose shivers with sensitivity. Why this impotence? Because among the diverse conceptions of a sentient being, only the *generalizable* givens move us, those to which our own memories can become analogous, attached. The rest, personal evocations, associations of ideas that the life of the mind has created in one brain and never in others, that, in art, is dead letter. And Rimbaud's writings teem with solipsisms of this kind.

So you can consider our poet fatally inconsistent, or, as the less sympathetic Remy de Gourmont dubbed Rimbaud, "a consistently pustulant toad."

Mallarmé's portrait of Rimbaud in a letter to Harrison Rhodes is moving despite the crabbed, tortuous prose Mallarmé unfortunately insisted on. The *Observateur* quotes fairly liberally from it (though not the references to "the stammerings of the last poems" and Rimbaud's hands "like those of a washerwoman"). Most important is the mention of his "very classic" effect, and of the "sumptuous disorder one could only call spiritually exotic." And the image of the "dazzle of a meteor, lit with no other motive than its presence, emerging solitary and extinguishing itself." But Mallarmé is mistaken in saying that "everything would have existed since without this passer-by of parts," though his "special case lives on forcefully." Of course, Mallarmé could not forgive Rimbaud his "frequentation of the cities' vulgar bazaar of illusions." But the account is largely sympathetic and climaxes in a passage (unquoted) about "a unique adventure in the history of art. That of a child precociously and impetuously brushed by the wing of literature, who, almost before having had time to exist, exhausted a tempestuous and magisterial destiny [*fatalité*] without recourse to a future."

Yet that future, posthumously, was to be his. By 1926, Cocteau noted that, "at present, Rimbaud was more of an encumbrance than Hugo"—*the* influence for a young poet to crawl out from under. And today Gallimard, France's leading publisher, reports Rimbaud as the house's number-two seller—after Marguerite Yourcenar! As Suzanne Bernard concludes her chapter on Rimbaud, "The man with the soles of wind has truly beaten new paths through the dark forests of language, and . . . the entire poetry of the twentieth century follows in his tracks." Almost all the major French poets of the first half of the century—Reverdy, Jacob, Char, Michaux, and Eluard—to mention only the most stellar ones, are his disciples; only the delightfully chameleonlike Apollinaire stands apart, and Valéry, of course, is the one true heir of Mallarmé.

And the influence continues. A typical

4 *The New York Review of Books*, June 1, 1967.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

motif in Rimbaud is the melding of earth and sky, of land and sea. Now here is Yves Bonnefoy (translated by Richard Pevear): "They walk, barefooted / In their absence, / And come to the banks / Of the river earth." Or consider Rimbaud's trick of converting violence into peacefulness by a sudden leap in moods. Here, again, is Bonnefoy: "Summer: / This screech-owl / Nailed to the threshold / By the star's peaceful iron [*Le fer en paix de l'étoile*]." And in his afterword to Bonnefoy's *Poems 1959-1975*, from which I have been quoting, Jean Starobinsky duly invokes Rimbaud.

Philippe Jaccottet, though Swiss-born, has become one of France's preeminent poets. Recall Rimbaud's way of intertwining the world of gods and magicians with that of mortals—his. Here is Jaccottet: "A brief thing, the time of a few footsteps outside, / but stranger yet than the mages and the gods." Rimbaud has "a white ray, dropping from the high heavens, abolishes this comedy." Jaccottet writes: "a light that leaps over words as if wiping them out." Isn't Jaccottet's "And draws from the invisible water / where invisible beasts perhaps drink still" akin to Rimbaud's "silk of the seas and arctic flowers; (they don't exist.)"?

And what about such an older poet of considerable stature as Francis Ponge? In an early poem (1922), "Sunday, or the Artist," he begins: "Brutally, at noon, the clamor of posters, the publicity of advertisers, plants its barbarous hatchet in the body [*masse*] of Paris. / It severs with one blow a hundred great green and red walls. It cleaves streets where nervous rails grind to the quick, it quarters wheel-broken, dismembered crossroads. Hoot, discordant trumpets! Collapse, railroad stations!" This could almost be a parody of Rimbaud; but here now is a passage from a 1943 text included in Ponge's *Proêmes*: "Of course the world is absurd! Of course, the meaninglessness of the world! / But what's tragic about that? / . . . Ontological suicide is the act only of a few young bourgeois (incidentally likable). / Let there be placed against it birth (or resurrection), *metalogical creation* (POETRY)." Here is the Rimbaldian repertoire of mysterious italics, orgies of capitalization, exclamation points and parentheses galore.

Clearly, I can provide no systematic survey here, only a spot check, a butterfly's view. Take Germany and Austria, where Rimbaud's influence is everywhere. We find it in two of the most prestigious poets of the early twentieth century, Georg Heym and the Austrian Georg Trakl. Both died young and tragically, like Rimbaud. Talking to Heym in a Berlin café in the winter of 1910-11, Paul Zech, poet and translator of Rimbaud, noted "his extraordinary predilection for Rimbaud, who in those days was hardly known in Germany." Formally, Heym does not resemble Rimbaud, except perhaps the early, rhymed poems, but thematically he is extremely close. Trakl, on the other hand, is close formally, too, as in the beginning of the prose poem "Metamorphosis of Evil":

> Autumn: black pacing along the woods' edge; minute of mute destruction; suddenly listening [*auflauscht*] the brow of the leper under the bare tree. Long-past evening now sinking along the stairway of moss; November. A bell rings and the shepherd leads a troop of black and red horses into the village. Under the hazel bushes, the green huntsman eviscerates some game. His hands steam with blood and the animal's shadow moans in the foliage above the man's eyes, brown and silent; the forest. Crows that scatter; three. Their flight resembles a sonata, full of faded chords and masculine melancholy. . . . etc.

Many Rimbaldian touches here! The inconsistent landscape: bare trees and foliage; the strange grammar: *auflauscht die Stirne* (literally: up listens the brow); the summation of a paragraph or sentence in a tacked-on word at the end: "November," "the forest," "three." (Cf. Rimbaud's "Métropolitain.") The unstable reference: does "brown and silent" go with the foliage or with the hunter's eyes? (Recall the *verset* from "Barbare," where we couldn't tell where silkiness stopped or how far nonexistence extended.) And these black and red horses *à la*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Franz Marc, relatives of "the great blue and black mares" in Rimbaud's "Ornières." Even the crows flying in sonata formation seem not unrelated to the bridges in "Les Ponts" that are "minor chords crisscrossing and taking off."

It is well known that the young Brecht was influenced by Rimbaud, both in his early poems and in his first plays. In *Baal*, the characters of Baal and Eckart are almost certainly modeled on Rimbaud and Verlaine. And in his journal (October, 1921), Brecht notes: "I thumb through the Rimbaud volume and borrow from it. How glowing it all is! Luminous paper! And he has shoulders of brass.—Whenever I work, when the lava flows, I see the West in lurid fires and believe in his vitality." And am I alone in encountering Rimbaud in that most magical of later twentieth-century German-language poets, Paul Celan? Take, for example, this from "Windgerecht" (Windrowed): "Later: / Snow-growth through all the casings, free / one single field, / numbered by a light ray: the voices."

It is no different in Italy, where Rimbaud, again, is much in evidence. A major Italian poet who wandered the earth, went mad, and died young, Dino Campana (1885-1932), was a self-declared Rimbaldian. Consider George Kay's translation of "Ship Under Way": "The mast swings, beat for beat, in the silence. / A faint white and green light falls from the mast. / The sky clear to the horizon, loaded green and gilt after the squall. / The white square of the ship's light on high / Illuminates the night's secret: from the window / The ropes from above in a gold triangle / And a globe white with smoke / Which does not exist like music / Above the circle with the muted beating of the water." Here, again, the something that doesn't exist, the story-book colors, the mighty leaps from the visual to the auditory and back, the sense of mystery without any noticeable straining to be mysterious, the indeterminate references: what doesn't exist, the globe or the smoke?

Already as a boy in Alexandria, Giuseppe Ungaretti was reading Rimbaud; here, in a prose translation by Joseph Cary, is his "The Buried Harbor": "The poet arrives there / and then ventures to the light with his songs / and scatters them // Of such poetry / remains to me / this nothing / of the inexhaustible secret."[5] As Cary points out, this is really a version of Rimbaud's *lettre du voyant*. But even such a very different poet as Eugenio Montale is not unaffected by Rimbaud. In a 1949 essay, he compliments Mozart, Bellini, and Verdi on setting "a clear and neutral discourse to which they could do violence." He begins another essay, on an old mentor, the poet Camillo Sbarbaro, by quoting him: "Rimbaud was the addiction of my adolescence." Now read a Montale poem such as "Eastbourne," and see if you are not reminded of Rimbaud; isn't, for example, the personalized goodness of *una bontà* rather like the reason of "A une Raison"?

Moving over to Greece—and remembering that Rimbaud, whomever else he castigated, unfailingly upheld classic Greek poetry—what do we find? Here is "Thanks," by Yannis Ritsos, as translated by Edmund Keeley: "You heard your voice saying: *thanks* / (so unexpected, dumb naturalness)—you were certain now: / a large piece of eternity belonged to you." This, again, is the private incident given over to the poem without mediation, without any care for universality. And, again, the italics, the parentheses, the laconism, even the unorthodox punctuation.

Now over to Hungary, for an actual prose poem (part of a sequence, as often in Rimbaud) by the marvelous János Pilinszky (1921-1981):

> Then at night we went on dreaming the battle, and that was like a stage image, which begins by coming to an end. The guests leave the table, the room empties out. A girl sweeps away the crumbs. Makes order. Night falls.
>
> From here on in everything attacks and everything flees: the inadmissible fates, the inadmis-

5 The double slash indicates one line's space. The period at the end is mine.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> sible situations, the inadmissible species of animals. And in the morning, we wakened to war as to order itself, as if with gunfire eternal peace were nearing the world.

True, this is much more coherent than a Rimbaud poem tends to be, but the theatrical trope, the chamois leaps of the imagery, the sudden changes in sentence length, with a two-word sentence summing up a paragraph, the basis in paradox—these are truly Rimbaldian.

An influence, then, that could be traced in all Western literatures. One could find it in Wallace Stevens, a supposed pure Mallarméan, in Geoffrey Hill, in Thom Gunn as in Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, and all the Beats and Beat-derivatives. "Rimbaud was the last great poet that our civilization will see" declared Hart Crane in 1926; in 1923, Ezra Pound had already pronounced, "The actual writing of poetry has advanced little or not at all since Rimbaud." [6]

Mallarmé may be in the bloodstream of all modern poets, whether they know it or not. He gave the word, beyond its meaning or meanings, over and above its sound, its shape on the page. A word became not a pictogram but a pattern in black on a white background that framed it in different ways with more or less surrounding whiteness, with companionship or isolation. More than that: words assumed the character of precious jewelry fitted into sonorous bracelets, necklaces, belts made up of precious stones in precise yet arcane combinations. Phrases became multivalent, forming strange, recondite, chiseled yet unstable relationships, proffering signification with one hand, withholding it with the other. The high priest was behind each verse, an abstruse smile on his lips, an intoxicating music in his chant. It is the music, in the later poems, of the emperor's nightingale brought to its highest mechanical perfection, inferior to the warblings of the real one only for those who prize folk poetry above all other, who hold Anonymous to be the greatest poet of all.

Rimbaud, too, is in every poet, and more visibly: like the rabbit inside the python, a bulge in the snake's middle. He reaches us sometimes through the mediation of the Surrealists, with their modifications; sometimes undiluted, neat. (I realize that this usage is British, but I can't say "straight," can I?) His words, individually and in conjunction, seem to be chosen carelessly. They appear to be effusions, gushings; they are a moment's recklessness caught in amber, a form that imitates formlessness to perfection. As Jacques Barzun puts it in *An Essay on French Verse*, "The form of these prose pieces . . . is itself an invitation to giving up the rational mind. . . . [T]he poem mirrors the unreality of what is."

Rimbaud is the poet of a world gone irrational—ours. As the Pole Tadeusz Rozewicz (born 1921) expressed it in a lyric, translated here by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh: ". . . Season in Hell / what a glorious age / hell heaven // The metaphor still living / bloomed within / metaphysics // letters and words / appeared in miraculous color . . . // Poetry began from that moment / to rave deliriously . . ." Rozewicz goes on to say that the bedeviling colors Rimbaud assigned to vowels are preferable to the post-nuclear-holocaust color scheme: everything simply white, a white desolation. I agree with Suzanne Bernard that Rimbaud was an anarchic demiurge, and would add only that he could exult in disorder because *he* could still feel himself its creator. *We* are its creations.

---

6 It may be worth a footnote to mention that the intellectually slumming academic of whose protagonist Sylvester Stallone made his second fortune based his hero's name, Rambo, on Rimbaud.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

British intellectuals in the Thatcher era

by Frank Johnson

Intellectuals were probably more important in the career of Margaret Thatcher than in that of any previous Conservative Prime Minister. Quite so, the reader may assume, they loathed her. True, most of them did, but not all. We have a paradox: the Conservative Prime Minister most loathed by intellectuals was also the one most helped by them. But they were two different sorts of intellectual. The English-speaking world tends to think of intellectuals as left-wing. Common observation suggests that most are. But by the time Mrs. Thatcher became Leader of the Opposition in 1975, a civil war had lately broken out within the academy. Left orthodoxy—about how to manage the economy, about how to eradicate poverty, about how to deal with the Soviet Union, about whether the Third World was invariably in the right, about whether the permissive society was a good thing after all—was under challenge. Several pillars of the old *New Statesman-Observer* class were tottering rightward. There was Mr. Paul Johnson, who had actually edited the *New Statesman*, and who was to become Mrs. Thatcher's champion in a thousand newspaper columns. There was Mr. Hugh (later Lord) Thomas, perhaps best known as author of the standard book on the Spanish Civil War, and one of the popularizers of the term "the Establishment," who was to become chairman of Mrs. Thatcher's Think Tank. Newspapers talked of a New Right.

The same was happening in the United States. There, it helped produce the most triumphant paradox: a President much mocked for his anti-intellectuality, and mental laziness, being at least as much influenced by intellectuals as Roosevelt or Kennedy had been—the difference being that his intellectuals were conservative. In Britain, it was to produce a Prime Minister who used one group of intellectuals—the rightish minority—to undermine the influence and pomp of another: the leftish majority. Both Mr. Reagan and Mrs. Thatcher were to demonstrate the proper relationship between the politician and the intellectuals whose ideas he or she takes up. The intellectuals' job is to win the battle of ideas, the politician's to win the battle of votes. In both countries, the right-wing intellectuals, often no less Utopian than the left-wing ones, were sometimes disappointed with what the politician achieved. But at least they had a politician. That is, one who took their ideas seriously. They are achieving rather less under either Mr. Bush or Mr. Major.

In 1975, a new Tory leader could adopt one of two attitudes to the intellectuals' incipient civil war. He or she could do what Mrs. Thatcher did: realize that, with four years of opposition stretching ahead, the right-wing intellectuals could provide her with improved weaponry with which to attack the Labour Government. Or he or she could have done what would have been done by her two main opponents in the leadership election: the former Prime Minis-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ter, Mr. Edward Heath, and, when she eliminated him on the first ballot, his deputy, Mr. William (now Lord) Whitelaw. That is, he or she could have regarded the chatter of intellectuals as at best useless to a practical politician and at worst a source of commitments that the Labour Government could use to embarrass the Conservative opposition. Sometimes, Mrs. Thatcher was indeed embarrassed. For example, on the causes of unemployment, she sided with Hayek and Friedman against the vulgar Keynesians. She correctly believed that the unemployment was as much the fault of unions as governments, and that in any case the unemployment statistics exaggerated the numbers genuinely seeking work. Inevitably, the Labour Government accused her of calling the unemployed work-shy. Plenty of the more orthodox Conservative politicians complained that she was robbing the Conservatives of the ability to use unemployment as an issue. But she won the 1979 election.

It was not the first time that the British intelligentsia had been divided more evenly than usual between Left and Right. It happened in the late 1940s, in reaction to the postwar Labour Government. That was the period in which Michael Oakeshott could succeed Harold Laski as Professor of Politics at the London School of Economics. But the matter is clouded by the importance that British Conservatives attach to being thought non-intellectual or anti-intellectual. The Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, said—or is said to have said—that an intellectual is to intellect what a gent is to a gentleman. That is, he is not the same sort of thing at all. Ever since J. S. Mill explained that the Tories were the Stupid Party, plenty of Tories have been eager to point out that he was quite right. By doing so, they announce a distrust of continental theory, a rootedness in values that cannot be undermined by the babble of the café, or the gobbledygook of the treatise. But that is only half the story.

When it needed someone to defend rootedness, and to fight off Peel's corn laws, the Country Party hired Disraeli. He fulfills most of our specifications of an intellectual, including the more pejorative ones—except that he neither went to nor taught at a university. But if the London of the 1840s had had cafés, he would have argued across their tables. Instead, it had salons and reviews, and he argued in them. Today he would have a column, or perhaps be one of the fashionable dons who in Britain appear on television chat shows.

So Tory heartiness has obscured the matter. So too has the pejorative definition of the intellectual used on the right—justifiably—since the vast expansion of the universities in the 1960s: that of the intellectual as, in Hayek's phrase, a dealer in second-hand ideas. But any glance at late-Victorian England reveals the existence of an intelligentsia quite like the French and Central European models from which the average Briton has traditionally shied away. The intellectual world that Mrs. Thatcher found in 1975 was similar to that with which Disraeli had to deal when he became Prime Minister in 1874. The coming into being of the French intelligentsia, as we know it, is sometimes dated from the Dreyfus affair of the early 1900s. The British intelligentsia can be dated from earlier: from the agitation over the "Bulgarian horrors" of the late 1870s. At first glance, it might be assumed that people who made their living by writing and thinking were opposed to Disraeli's policy. That policy was conducted in the interests of what would later be called the containment of Russia. Disraeli declined to intervene against a fellow anti-Russian power, Turkey, that was massacring insurgent Bulgarian Christians. Here was the first great "human rights" agitation, and it was led by the first great politician to embody morality against *Realpolitik*: Gladstone.

But Lord Blake, Disraeli's modern biographer and historian of the Conservative Party from Peel to Mrs. Thatcher, says Disraeli "too readily dismissed" the intelligentsia as his enemies. "The older generation undoubtedly opposed him, but the younger intellectuals, the supporters of empire, efficiency and no nonsense were on his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

side. Already liberal imperialism was casting its shadow before it. Whereas Carlyle, Ruskin, Freeman, Froude, Browning, Trollope, Darwin, Spencer—an incongruous mixture, no doubt—supported the agitation, Fitzjames Stephen, Jowett, Hyndman [a High Tory who later became Britain's first notable Marxist], Matthew Arnold, regarded it as a tiresome irrelevance."

To a certain extent, this difference between the generations was to be found in the attitude of the higher intellectuals toward Mrs. Thatcher. The older ones were overwhelmingly against her. But the younger—like younger intellectuals immemorially—were rebelling against the orthodoxy of their elders, and more of the younger were for her. They too wanted "no nonsense." The crucial phrase here is "higher intelligentsia." Pro-Thatcher intellectuals were largely confined to the intelligentsia's higher reaches. Since Disraeli's day, however, and in Mrs. Thatcher's lifetime, there had come into being another intelligentsia—the term being very much used here in the pejorative sense. It was financed by the expansion—brought about by the belief that more and more people had a "right" to higher education—of the number of graduates. This expansion was created by means of such institutions as the polytechnic: more than a high school, less than a university. It created a kind of *lumpen* intelligentsia—possessors of a little learning, and final proof that that is a dangerous thing. Sometime during the Thatcher years, someone minted the word "polyocracy." The polyocracy was serenely unaware that there had been any challenge to the old left orthodoxy. Almost anyone sufficiently aware to note such a thing would not be languishing, either as teacher or student, in a polytechnic. The polyocracy was to produce anti-Thatcherites by the million.

In traditional Marxist iconography, such as Eisenstein's films, the proletariat is sullen until given hope and optimism by inspirational leaders such as Lenin and Trotsky. But the polyocracy was perhaps the first socialist mass whose leaders were as sullen and demoralized as the proletariat they led. E. P. Thompson, the historian of the early working class, and campaigner against the stationing of American nuclear missiles in Europe, was perhaps the only inspirational left-winger who became famous during the Thatcher years. Otherwise, the voices to whom the polyocracy listened tended to be writers of plays and novels that vaguely implied that the distresses of the inner city, or the alleged dangers from nuclear power plants, were the fault of the system in general and Mrs. Thatcher in particular. But they offered little hope that anyone else could improve the situation. When Mrs. Thatcher fell last November, one of these authors, the playwright Mr. Howard Brenton, wrote in *The Guardian*—which during the Thatcher years became the polyocracy's paper and saved its circulation thereby—that the Thatcher years were a nightmare from which we were now emerging. But he as good as conceded that left-wing playwrights had not devised an alternative society.

The older intelligentsia retained more of the old optimism, perhaps because Mrs. Thatcher's attitude to taxation of higher incomes enabled it to retain more of its old wealth. It did not think Mrs. Thatcher was bad because the system was bad. The system was good when it was run by good politicians. It was Mrs. Thatcher who was bad. The older intelligentsia was divided as to who the good politicians were. Such a sympathizer with old-fashioned Labour as Mr. John Mortimer, a playwright with a lighter touch than Mr. Brenton, had in mind Mr. Michael Foot, who at the 1983 election played the Walter Mondale to Mrs. Thatcher's Ronald Reagan. The average Oxbridge don had in mind the now-defunct Social Democratic Party, as embodied by two politicians—Mr. Roy (now Lord) Jenkins and Mrs. Shirley Williams—who had defected from the Labour Party because of people like Mr. Foot. But both groups were united in their loathing of Mrs. Thatcher.

It is important to remember the social, even more than the political, origins of this loathing—social being defined in both its

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

deeper sense and its snobbish one. In the latter sense, Mrs. Thatcher—the daughter of a Nonconformist grocer and brought up in a Lincolnshire town that has the romanticism of neither Blenheim nor the Welsh mining valleys—was everything that the older intelligentsia had either never known or was trying to escape. Dr. Jonathan Miller, physician and theater director, when asked why the intellectuals were against Mrs. Thatcher, replied: "Isn't the reason self-evident? It's the same as why the bulk of the human race is hostile to typhoid." He added that he himself found her "loathsome, repulsive in almost every way." It was not merely that she was a complete philistine—he explained—it was her "odious suburban gentility and sentimental, saccharine patriotism, catering to the worst elements of commuter idiocy."

To his credit, Dr. Miller, in the same interview, conceded that he was being snobbish. Upper-crust Tories, he explained, regarded social snobbery as their birthright, but when it came to intellectual snobbery—which, he implied, was perfectly respectable—that was regarded as a usurpation of the rights of the aristocracy. Lady Warnock—Mary Warnock, the philosopher—was quoted in a newspaper in 1987 as objecting to the alleged way Mrs. Thatcher "shouted people out." This, the quotation continued, epitomized the worst of the lower middle class; there was her patronizing elocution voice, like a schoolmistress losing patience with the children. She added that she had once seen Mrs. Thatcher on television choosing clothes in Marks & Spencer—the popular department-store chain—and there was really something quite obscene about it, picking out yet another blouse with a tie at the neck.

Relative immortality was conferred on that quotation by its inclusion in what has become the standard book on Mrs. Thatcher among the liberal-minded—Mr. Hugo Young's (1989). True, in another interview, Lady Warnock said that the earlier interviewer had not quoted the admiring things she had said about Mrs. Thatcher: "For example, I thought she had done brilliantly with the unions." As for the department store, "I buy an enormous amount of clothes from Marks & Spencer myself." What she had disliked was the artificial way Mrs. Thatcher had acted up in the store for the television cameras—"feeling the material" and so on.

"You mean falsely depicting herself as an ordinary housewife," the interviewer suggested.

"Yes, that's it."

The view that Mrs. Thatcher had "done brilliantly" with the unions—that is, she had curbed their power—showed Lady Warnock to be less fair-minded than she thought she was being. Union power was a threat to the quality of life of the higher and older intelligentsia as much as it was to that of any other order of society, except the polyocracy that positively enjoyed watching or helping huge strikes that made life more exciting at the polytechnic than it might otherwise be. British Governments had been surrendering to the unions for a generation. Curbing their power was perhaps the single greatest achievement of a British Prime Minister since the Second World War. Compared to it, accents—and behavior in front of television cameras in department stores—were of negligible significance.

But Mrs. Thatcher caused intellectuals to lose their sense of proportion. Consider the case of another theater director, Sir Peter Hall. He had actually voted Conservative in 1979. (Under Labour, the unions were disrupting the theater just as they were disrupting many other activities.) But there seems to be even less gratitude in the arts than in politics or business. "Well over 90 percent of the people in the performing arts, education, and the creative world are against her," Sir Peter was quoted as saying, once the unions were safely beaten (something achieved by Mrs. Thatcher with the defeat of the great miners' strike of 1984-85). Moreover, Sir Peter was one of many who feared that Mrs. Thatcher was helping to swamp Britain with American junk culture. He saw a time when "broadcasting is taken over by American-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

owned companies spewing out plastic programmes, universities teaching nothing but science and technology." It was American television that had brought the United States to its present psychotic, crime-ridden situation. (Sir Peter conducted this interview on the telephone from Chicago.)

These thinkers, then, would deny my earlier suggestion that Mrs. Thatcher was influenced by intellectuals. But there are various kinds of intellectuals. Mrs. Thatcher was interested in economists, historians, and people who think about politics. Sadly for her, the British intellectuals who most often reach the television screen—both in Britain and in the United States—are novelists and theater directors. I do not suppose that Sir Peter has much of a grasp of, or interest in, Oakeshott or Hayek.

Mrs. Thatcher's premiership coincided with the rise of politicized feminism, but she did not benefit from it. When she first became the Conservative leader, there was an agonized debate among feminists about whether the sisterhood should support her, even though she was a Tory. It had long been assumed that the first woman Prime Minister would be Labour. As late as the mid-Seventies, *Cosmopolitan* thought that the best bet for first woman Prime Minister was the socialist Mrs. Barbara Castle, with Mrs. Shirley Williams second. As Thatcherism wore on, any feminists inclined to feel "gender loyalty" changed their attitude. This was a vindication of Simone de Beauvoir, who had warned long before that women's solidarity was impossible because each woman, in her individual life, had competing commitments. Feminists were soon complaining that Mrs. Thatcher had "done nothing for women." There was even a theory that Mrs. Thatcher had been "ideologically colonized by masculinism." Mr. Leo Abse, a Labour back-bencher with an interest (some would say an obsessive interest) in psychoanalysis, wrote a study of her in which he emphasized that she always praised her father, never her mother.

The intellectuals' assault on Mrs. Thatcher reached its apogee half-way through her time of office, when her old university, Oxford—where she had taken a degree in chemistry good enough to allow her to go on to postgraduate work and a B.S.C.—refused her an honorary degree. Ostensibly, the grounds were that she had cut the higher-education budget. (So had Labour Governments in their time.) But it is difficult not to believe that another reason was social—in the sense of snobbish.

Mrs. Thatcher, throughout her political career, was the victim of the literary intellectuals' loathing of the lower middle class. This loathing expressed itself especially in their lack of any understanding that all that commuting, about which Dr. Miller was so contemptuous, might help to create the wealth that makes possible the subsidies that enable Dr. Miller and Sir Peter to direct their theatrical productions. But there was more to it than that. Mrs. Thatcher defied intellectual taboos. For example, in the early Eighties, she allowed unemployment to rise in order to bring down inflation. The unemployment imagery that the average literary intellectual carries in his or her head is from the Great Depression—soup kitchen, flat caps. It is imagery of the little man helpless against the system—a system that the literary intellectual understands but believes the little man does not. The early-Eighties unemployment was caused by the little man pricing himself, through his powerful unions, out of work. Yet to say that, as Mrs. Thatcher did, robbed the little man of his victimhood, and suggested that he might still be in work if he practiced Mrs. Thatcher's despised provincial virtues of restraint and willingness to learn new skills when the old ones were no longer in demand. Today, unemployment in Britain is again rising. Partly, this is because of British membership in the European Community's exchange-rate mechanism. But the higher intelligentsia does not blame Mr. Major for it in the same way that it blamed Mrs. Thatcher (although the polyocracy cheerfully blames it on "the system"). The difference is that the higher intelligentsia is "European." Fur-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thermore, Mr. Major defers to it, and Mrs. Thatcher did not. For example, he has appointed the sociologist Mr. Gary (now Lord) Runciman—sometimes credited with inventing the concept of "relative deprivation"—to chair a royal commission (that is, an independent committee of inquiry) on the criminal-justice system. (One of the subplots of the Thatcher years was that she no longer used the higher intelligentsia for such tasks. Indeed, she never appointed any royal commissions—seeing them as the traditional means by which Whitehall buys time and avoids controversial decisions.) Mrs. Thatcher was continuously Prime Minister longer than anyone for over one hundred years. We shall see how much good deference does Mr. Major.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

On the neglect of poetry in the United States

by Louis Simpson

There has been considerable talk about poetry in the United States, not because people are reading it but because they aren't. In an article in *Commentary* in August 1988, Joseph Epstein said that the neglect of poetry was the fault of the poets; they don't write as well as the modernist poets of the early decades of the century. Many American poets teach in universities and this makes their writing academic and obscure . . . it has nothing to say to the common reader. A year later the poet Donald Hall published a rebuttal in *Harper's*: he cited the large sales figures of some poets' books, and he said there were many poetry readings. He seemed to think that American poetry was doing very well.

In May of this year, the poet Dana Gioia published an article in *The Atlantic* in which he commented on both Epstein's and Hall's opposing points of view. Yes, many books of verse are published in the States every year, and many poetry readings take place, mostly on college campuses. On the other hand, the books are read by no one but poets and would-be poets, and the audiences at readings are composed of the same people, those who have a professional interest in poetry, that is, poetry as a means to getting a job . . . teaching "creative writing." Gioia blames the proliferation of university writing programs for creating a "subculture" of poets in universities who teach poetry-writing workshops, publish one another's writing in magazines and anthologies, and praise one another's writing in reviews. No honest criticism of contemporary verse is being published, Gioia argues, and the public has grown skeptical of poetry altogether. It was different forty years ago when a fearless critic such as Randall Jarrell was writing. Jarrell didn't hesitate to poke fun at the anthologist Oscar Williams though he knew this would keep him out of Williams's anthologies. An anthology of American verse these days is filled with the mediocre poems of creative-writing teachers, and, says Gioia,

> the proliferation of literary journals and presses over the past thirty years has been a response less to an increased appetite for poetry among the public than to the desperate need of writing teachers for professional validation. Like subsidized farming that grows food no one wants, a poetry industry has been created to serve the interests of the producers and not the consumers.

Gioia has some suggestions for remedying the situation. When poets give poetry readings they should read the works of other poets as well as their own, the way Dylan Thomas used to do. Poets should give readings together with performances of music. Poets should write prose about poetry more often and more candidly. "Anthologies," Gioia says, "are poetry's gateway to the general culture. They should not be used as pork barrels for the creative-writing trade." Anthologies should be made up of master-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pieces that move and delight the reader. Poetry should be performed more and analyzed less: "Poetry needs to be liberated from literary criticism. Poems should be memorized, recited, and performed." In line with this, "poets and arts administrators should use radio to expand the art's audience. . . . Mixing poetry with music on classical and jazz stations could re-establish a direct relationship between poetry and the general audience."

These are practical suggestions—it is possible that these measures might make a difference, winning back a few thousand intelligent readers who think that poetry is not for them. Anything that can take the writing and reading of poems out of the university and directly to the public is all to the good. I agree that the teaching of creative writing in universities has done a great deal of harm. On the one hand, it produces quantities of mediocre verse such as fill the pages of *American Poetry Review*. On the other, it drives away the public. As Gioia says: "Seeing so much mediocre verse not only published but praised, slogging through so many dull anthologies and small magazines, most readers—even sophisticated ones like Joseph Epstein—now assume that no significant new poetry is being written. This public skepticism represents the final isolation of verse as an art form in contemporary society."

My own experience in teaching writing courses backs up Gioia's remarks about the "subculture." I admit to having taught such courses—not often, but often enough to have formed a definite opinion of them. Universities offer courses and degrees in creative writing because they are profitable . . . to the university. Many people would like to be writers and will pay good money to be told that they are. A teacher of creative writing is expected to encourage students—a very different thing from giving honest criticism. "But," says the administrator, "we're very strict in admitting students. The ten students in your section are among the very best students we have." This may be so, but of ten such students perhaps two have the slightest chance of developing into poets. So you are giving the others false hope. But the administrator is not at a loss—he has another defense to fall back on. "Even if the others never write a poem for the rest of their lives, they will have gained invaluable experience: they will have learned what it is like to create, from the inside." A nice line of argument, but entirely hypocritical: this is not the way such courses, workshops in writing poetry and fiction, are presented to the students. They enter them thinking that, by being exposed to the comments of a writing-teacher, and their fellow students, they will be made into writers.

If I think of the poets of my generation, or those who came before us, not one of them was made a poet by taking courses in creative writing. They learned by reading, writing, and knowing one or two people who would criticize what they wrote. A remark by Edward Gibbon should be placed above the entrance to every writing program in the United States: "The power of instruction is seldom of much efficacy, except in those happy dispositions where it is almost superfluous."

The students I had in a poetry-writing workshop were amazingly ignorant. They wanted to write poetry because they were far more interested in their own feelings than in the feelings of other people . . . they knew hardly anything of history, philosophy, or religion. What they did know about was writing as a career—the names of successful poets were often on their lips, the ones who were awarded prizes and who frequently gave poetry readings. The writing students were blown about by every wave of fashion . . . "Have you written your Jorie Graham poem yet?" While they were criticizing one another's poems they were learning nothing. One thing they weren't learning was the forms of verse that had developed over the centuries. They didn't know anything about meter, so they could only write free verse. This was usually a monologue, prose that went galumphing, the lines breaking where they shouldn't and stumbling in and out of meter.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

So I agree with Gioia's description of the "subculture"—it has produced much bad writing and driven the public away from verse. Where I part company with Gioia —and with Joseph Epstein and Donald Hall —is in their emphasis on the public function of poetry. Is that really the main concern? When I think about poets of the past whose works I love: Dante, Chaucer, Milton, Wordsworth, Whitman . . . or the great poets of this century: Yeats, Rilke, Frost, Eliot, Jiménez, and a dozen others . . . was their relationship to the public a main concern? They thought about the public, of course . . . how could they avoid it? If they lived in exile, as did Dante and Jiménez, they were grieved at being separated from the life they knew. If they were at odds with their countrymen, as were Milton and Wordsworth, they felt just as isolated as those who lived in exile. Yeats was a senator, but as a poet he felt isolated, fearful of growing old and being out of touch with younger minds. But these were secondary considerations: for these poets, their relationship to the public was not the first thing on their minds. Other matters were more important: politics, philosophy, religion . . . but, above all, the act of writing. Their main concern was wresting poetry out of the seemingly incoherent stream of experience. I am not saying that they did not want to be published and heard . . . obviously they did. But this was only an afterthought.

This is why I part company with those who write about bringing poetry to the public, acute as their observations may be. I think they place the emphasis entirely on the wrong thing. It doesn't matter in the least if a poet sells thirty thousand copies of a book or a hundred copies. All that matters is what is in the book and how well it is written. I could list names of poets who in their day sold their tens of thousands and whose writing today doesn't matter to anyone at all. Does anyone today read Bailey's *Festus*? Yet in the nineteenth century Bailey was held by many to be a better poet than Tennyson or Browning. The relationship of the poetry to the public is a matter for historians of culture to ponder—it is of no real concern to the poet or to lovers of poetry.

The poets I have named—Dante, Chaucer, and the rest—were great poets. To talk of greatness makes some people uneasy. They don't like talking on such a high plane. Sophisticated people are afraid of seeming naïve . . . maybe they have a memory of childhood they wish to suppress . . . a tyrannical parent or teacher. They aren't at all prudish about sex but they are embarrassed by any mention of spiritual life. If you use the word "great" you are likely to be called idealistic or romantic. In university departments of the humanities greatness is not mentioned—academics prefer a sociological view of the human mind and its productions, for people can be trained to think as a group, whereas greatness has no need of teachers. The poststructural theorists who for the past twenty years have infested American universities have given a philosophical underpinning to the distrust of greatness: deconstructionists don't believe in authors, much less in calling any writing great. According to the followers of Derrida and de Man, poems aren't written by individuals, they are written by the language we use, that is, by society. You have heard the theories, I am sure, and I don't mean to waste my time on them—they will soon return to the dark. But, as I have said, many readers feel uneasy about locating the impression they receive from a work of art in some quality of the artist's mind. Yet it is the most obvious thing in the world that for art to be great, for it to reach out to people, to move and delight them, it must proceed from a man or woman who is great.

Dana Gioia's suggestions for bringing poetry to the public sound plausible, but they attack the problem from outside, suggesting certain practical measures that could be taken. In this his approach is typically American. But he doesn't speak of the one thing, the only thing, that can surely make a difference. He doesn't speak of the demand that poetry be great. This is what the public wants . . . anything less is not going to please

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it. Performances of mediocre poems will not make the public like poetry any better. It has always been possible to fill an auditorium for an evening of poetry by a visiting Russian poet, or a group of poets protesting something or other. But these occasions have not made the public like poetry the day after. Only a great poem, a poem it remembers, can make it do that.

Poetry is writing, not performance. Some people disagree—they think poetry should be performed. But if poetry is one of the performing arts it must compete with television, theater, and movies. There is a very clear danger to the poet who believes in performance: he will stress theatrical elements at the expense of thought. There is a communion between writer and reader that cannot take place when poetry is read aloud to a roomful of people.

Can poetry compete with rap lyrics? The songs of Bob Marley? The squirming of Madonna? I wrote to Gioia saying that poetry could not compete with television, and he replied that the potential audience for poetry he had in mind was not TV-viewers but 2 percent of the population. But this is not an answer to my basic objection: he was urging the poet to be a performer. Every step you take in that direction is a step away from poetry. The work of the poet is writing. All other efforts detract from this.

"No art," a poet said, "ever grew by looking into the eyes of the public." Amen to that. But then you have to think that poetry is an art, and that the poet aims to make it grow. If you conceive of poetry as entertainment, which is what reaching out for a wider audience requires, then by all means do everything you can to increase your audience. But will it be an audience for poetry or for theatrics—an attractive personality, a striking emotional delivery? The people who would rather have their poetry in performance are not lovers of poetry but of performance.

I don't believe in poets' trying to reach the public . . . poetry is bound to lose that battle. I believe with Keats that the world is a vale of soul-making, and I believe that it is the poet's task to help us make our souls by showing us how he makes his. An American novelist put it well. "Art," said Flannery O'Connor, "is not anything that goes on 'among' people. . . . It is something that one experiences alone for the purpose of realizing in a fresh way, through the senses, the mystery of existence."

The way to overcome the present neglect of poetry is to write great poems. If poets can do this they don't have to worry about being neglected. If not tomorrow, or ten years from now, one day their poems will be read and appreciated. I believe this with all my heart. If I did not believe this I would have stopped writing long ago. Every time I sit down to write, it is in the hope that I shall write well . . . better than I have written before. At such times the public is the furthest thing from my mind.

> Fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise
> (That last infirmity of noble mind)
> To scorn delights, and live laborious days;
> But the fair guerdon when we hope to find,
> And think to burst out into sudden blaze,
> Comes the blind Fury with the abhorred
> shears,
> And slits the thin-spun life. "But not the
> praise,"
> Phoebus replied, and touched my trembling
> ears;
> "Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil,
> Nor in the glistering foil
> Set off to the world, nor in broad rumor lies,
> But lives and spreads aloft by those pure eyes
> And perfect witness of all-judging Jove;
> As he pronounces lastly on each deed,
> Of so much fame in Heaven expect thy meed."

If the word "Heaven" evokes resistance in the modern reader, the reader is at liberty to exchange it for some other, more acceptable word. In any case, Milton made the point I am trying to make. Poetry doesn't depend on "broad rumor." It comes from within the poet. If someone is listening, well and good. If no one is, so much the worse for the public.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And consider this: poems that were once thought obscure and out of the reach of all but a few initiates—the poems of the modernists whom Joseph Epstein says he admires, though I doubt he would have admired them at the time—are now in the anthologies. Chaucer, Dante, Wordsworth, and Whitman continue to find readers. How did this come about? Not because these poets had a mission to bring poetry to the public, but because, to borrow from Robert Frost, they were troubled by something in them. They had something to say and could say it well. I am sure that when Patrick Kavanagh wrote "The Great Hunger" he was thinking about life in Ireland, not about the public for his writing.

There are poets in the United States who, I suppose, could be said to be suffering from neglect. If they are suffering it is because they think they are. All that it takes to end the neglect of poetry is for the poets to stop feeling neglected and get on with their work. They need not be concerned about the matters Donald Hall is informed about: how many books of verse were sold and poetry readings given. They may ignore Joseph Epstein's low opinion of contemporary verse . . . what does this have to do with the poems they are writing? They may say to Dana Gioia, Thank you. The measures you advise might induce some people to attend performances of poetry and music, to listen to poetry on the radio, or even to read books of verse, but this is not what is uppermost in my mind. I am not thinking about the public, I am trying to accomplish what an American poet once said was the main task of the poet: to lift into poetry by an act of imagination things that are right under my nose.

This may seem a hard and lonely road. Well then, let us be lonely together. We owe it to the public to write as well as we can, and this requires solitary thought.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The importance of T. E. Lawrence

by David Fromkin

In 1988, on the centenary of Thomas Edward ("T. E.") Lawrence, the *Economist* observed that he "remains—in the curious company of James Dean—the most widely publicized folk-hero of the century." Especially in Great Britain, but in the United States and Europe as well, books about him continue to flood the market. The BBC, which broadcast a television documentary about him in the 1960s, broadcast another in 1986; and the haunting David Lean film *Lawrence of Arabia* was re-released recently, in a fuller version, to continuing acclaim. A new selection of Lawrence's letters was published in 1988. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, his partly fictional account of the Arab Revolt and his role in it, continues to sell in bookstores more than a half century after its first publication, and is said to be one of the most widely read books in the English language. A massive authorized biography of him published in 1988 did not succeed in saying the final word, although it was intended to do so; yet another biography —perhaps the fortieth to be published in English or French—appeared the following year.[1]

The puzzles he set, and the ambiguities of his life and thought, continue to fascinate and to baffle. They are likely to do so well beyond his second centenary. In a slim volume of scholarly essays[2] that appeared in 1989, he was compared to Homer, Xenophon, Rousseau, Kipling, Lord Byron, Goethe, Rimbaud, James Joyce, and T. S. Eliot. Liddell Hart, theorist of military strategy, compared him to the Great Captains: a select group that, most would say, includes only Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, and no more than a handful of others.

So important was his prestige to that of the British Empire that when a book exposing some of his personal secrets was about to appear two decades after his death, there was a movement to stop it; the artist Eric Kennington wrote to Sir Ronald Storrs, "Would not publication . . . do great harm to Great Britain (and the white races) . . . among friend & enemies, & weaken our prestige & power with all dark-skinned races?"

He was idolized. The novelist John Buchan, who ought to have known that some of Lawrence's tales were fabrications, wrote: "I am not much of a hero-worshiper . . . but I would have followed Lawrence over the edge of the world." The historian James Shotwell, an American delegate to the Peace Conference (1919), called Lawrence the "successor of Muhammad." An Anglican clergyman, conducting Oxford services for

1 *Lawrence of Arabia: The Authorized Biography of T. E. Lawrence*, by Jeremy Wilson; Atheneum, 1,188 pages, $35. *The Golden Warrior: The Life and Legend of Lawrence of Arabia*, by Lawrence James; Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 404 pages, $19.50.

2 *T. E. Lawrence: Soldier, Writer, Legend*, edited by Jeffrey Meyers; St. Martin's Press, 220 pages, $39.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

T. E., said he was making no direct comparison, but did so anyway: he claimed that in life and work, Lawrence was another Jesus Christ. Who was Lawrence? What made him so important?

Lawrence, as the world now knows, was not Lawrence. The illegitimate child of an illegitimate child, he was the son of Thomas Chapman, later to become Sir Thomas Chapman, the seventh Baronet of his line. The Chapmans were Protestant squires in Ireland, where they had acquired their first lands centuries before through the patronage of their kinsman Sir Walter Raleigh. Chapman, who already had a wife and daughters, ran away with Sarah, the family governess. The offspring out of wedlock of a Norwegian father and an English mother, she was a woman as powerful and almost as fiercely religious as his wife. Thomas and Sarah took the surname "Lawrence" and had five sons together, of whom the second was T. E., born in 1888.

Unlike his brothers, who grew up in ignorance of the deception, T. E. learned at some point during his boyhood that his outwardly respectable churchgoing parents, despite all his mother's puritanical religious sermonizing, were living in sin, using assumed names, and acting out a lie. Aspects of T. E.'s behavior often have been explained as an outgrowth of this: of his knowledge that his parents were frauds, and of his having to play a false role himself by answering to the name Lawrence. Decades later he tried calling himself by other names—Ross and Shaw—but they seemed wrong, too. Writing of himself in the third person, he said: "The friends of his manhood called him 'T. E.' for convenience and to show him that they recognized how his adopted surnames—Lawrence, Ross, Shaw, whatever they were—did not belong."

He was a born double agent. He loved deceptions, puzzles, and disguises. But so did others in the England of his time. It was the age of Frederick Rolfe, who passed himself off as Baron Corvo and wrote an autobiographical fantasy in which he became Pope Hadrian the Seventh. When Lawrence was a child, impersonation took its timelessly bestselling form in Anthony Hope's *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894).

All his life, Lawrence told tales, passing off his inventions or exaggerations as the truth. But so did a surprising number of his noted contemporaries. It is notoriously difficult to find a completely true sentence in the multivolume memoirs of David Lloyd George, the Prime Minister under whom Lawrence served. Ford Madox Ford, who was central to London's literary set when Lawrence tried his hand at writing, bragged of friendships with people he did not know, and described encounters that never took place. Harold J. Laski, theoretician of the Socialist Left, friend and correspondent of Justice Holmes, did the same thing.

In fabricating stories, Lawrence cheated as a child cheats, with no essential dishonesty, meaning no harm, but passionately desiring the attention and recognition that the achievements bragged of will bring. He sought the approval of adults. As a boy, he was the perfect Scout (though the Scout movement had not yet started), disciplining himself to learn stealth, craft, and all sorts of survival skills that he was unlikely to be called upon to use in his home town of Oxford. He taught himself self-denial and endurance, gave up eating meat for years, practiced going without sleep, built muscles, and rode a bicycle one hundred miles a day. Later he learned to be a crack shot.

With a head disproportionately large, he looked shorter than his five feet four inches. With his puckish grin, his impish love of teasing, and his irreverence, the shortness made him look like a boy who never grew up. Indeed he was in some ways a case of arrested development. Emotionally he never reached puberty; typically, his lifelong attitude toward the opposite sex was that of a twelve-year-old who thinks that including girls in activities spoils the fun.

Perpetual boyhood was a theme that ran strongly through the British imagination in his time (and afterward). It found its full expression in Barrie's *Peter Pan*, which ap-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

peared in 1904, when Lawrence was in his teens. Adult Britons lingered, in continuing fascination, in the world of their childhood, as witness the enormous hold on public attention exercised by Kipling's tale of school days, *Stalky & Co.*, and by Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*. Lawrence's contemporaries P. G. Wodehouse and A. A. Milne (creator of Winnie-the-Pooh) were like him in refusing to become adults; and like him, too, in creating imaginary worlds—for the Arabian desert portrayed by Lawrence is a work of art—into which the schoolboy in every reader can escape. So T. E. Lawrence's strong appeal to the imagination of Englishmen, at least in part, may well have been due—may still be due—to his having tapped this powerful vein of sentiment buried beneath the surface of British life.

The heroines in Wodehouse's novels win approval only if they are good sports: one of the lads. Lawrence's tastes ran in similar directions. As a very young man, without preliminaries, he proposed marriage to a girl he knew only slightly; what seems to have been distinctive about her was that she was a tomboy.

It is not that he was homosexual, at least in the usual sense, although he often appeared to be, perhaps unconsciously, flirting in that direction. Vyvyan Richards, a friend of his young manhood who felt a homosexual passion for him, later wrote: ". . . for me it was love at first sight. He had neither flesh nor carnality of any kind; he just did not understand. He received my affection, my sacrifice, in fact, eventually my total subservience, as though it was his due. He never gave the slightest sign that he understood my motives or fathomed my desires." Of sex with other men, Lawrence said: "I couldn't ever do it, I believe: the impulse strong enough to make me touch another creature has not yet been born in me." Of sex with women, "I haven't ever: and don't much want to." Concern with "our comic reproductive processes" should not be "a main business of life," he wrote; but it bothered him a lot, and, in army days, he found the coarse sex talk in the barracks more than upsetting: to him it was maddening.

His sexual puritanism was not dissimilar to that of his religious mother—which is ironic, for he directed his life toward freeing himself from her. Even in the last phase of his life, he spoke bitterly of how she tried "to break into the circle" of his "integrity." He wrote her: "You talk of 'sharing my life' . . . but that I won't allow." He wrote of her: "I have a terror of her knowing anything about my feelings, or convictions, or way of life. If she knew they would be damaged: violated: no longer mine . . . Knowledge of her will prevent my ever making any woman a mother . . ." But at last, because she survived him, she won; above his dead body she placed a tombstone with a text from the Bible—her holy book, not his.[3] All his life he had fought to free himself of her, but at the end of it he found himself entombed forever beneath his mother's pieties.

At university—Jesus College, Oxford—Lawrence found a mentor in David Hogarth, Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum, who led him to a career as an archeologist in the Middle East. When the First World War broke out, Lawrence became a junior officer and was sent out to Cairo as an interpreter and mapmaker—and Hogarth appeared as Lt.-Commander in the Royal Navy and a key figure in British intelligence in the Middle East, who later was assigned to head the Arab Bureau, the special unit established to deal with the Arab Middle East. As such Hogarth worked under Gilbert Clayton, who in the autumn of 1914 was made head of all British civilian and military intelligence in Egypt, and alongside Ronald Storrs, a Foreign Office official who held the especial confidence of Lord Kitchener, England's proconsul in Egypt, "temporarily" in London as War Minister.

Though destined for eventual independence, Egypt was then a British protectorate. It was at the front line in the war that

3 An observation made in 1977 in *T. E. Lawrence*, by Desmond Stewart; Harper & Row, 352 pages, $15.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had broken out against the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish sultanate which then ruled the Arab Middle East as well as the lands now called Turkey and Israel.

Cairo seethed with intrigue. Arab exiles from Syria and elsewhere dangled alluring possibilities of action behind enemy lines before British intelligence officials who were credulous and ill-informed. The Turks had extensive spy networks behind British lines, but the English had none behind theirs: the British commanding general in Egypt confessed to Kitchener that "I can get no information . . .—our agents cannot get through —those we had on the other side have been bagged."

It was from the Cairene world of schemes and dreams, in which things were rarely what British officialdom believed them to be, that tiny young T. E. Lawrence began his rise to world fame.

Lawrence did not come in at the beginning of what he called "the show"; he came in at the middle. To understand what he achieved, and why his government found the exploits he invented as useful as those he actually accomplished, one must know what had come before.

There was no good reason for England to be embroiled in a war with the Ottoman Empire, which had been her ally and protégé for a century. The war against Germany and Austro-Hungary had broken out in Europe, between Europeans, and had no connection to the Ottoman Sultan or his domains. It was an accident, the details of which need not be gone into here, that brought the Empire into collision with the Allies—who had no quarrel with the Sultan, and no desire to fight him.

Britain underestimated the Ottoman Empire, and regarded the Sultan's war against England as a nuisance rather than a danger. Britain's War Minister, Lord Kitchener, was determined not to allow the Middle East to distract attention from the real war: the war that raged in Europe. All forces would be concentrated on the western front. Only when Germany and Austria surrendered would the Allies send troops to the Middle East.

Kitchener and his lieutenants in Egypt, who were Lawrence's mentors, had grown up in the service of the Great Game, the century-long conflict that pitted Britain against her rivals France and Russia in the Middle East. In the 1914 war, France and Russia were England's allies; but Kitchener and his followers looked ahead to the post-war world, in which the Middle Eastern rivalry with Russia and France would resume. It was in this context that Kitchener in 1914 initiated a secret correspondence with Hussein ibn Ali, the Turkish-appointed Emir of Mecca. As Emir, Hussein was the protector of the Holy Places of the Mohammedan religion located in the Hejaz, a province in the west of what is now Saudi Arabia, then governed by the Ottoman Empire.

Anticipating that, when the war was over, Russia would seize control of Islam by setting up a puppet Turkish Sultan as Caliph of the Faithful, Kitchener schemed to set up the Emir Hussein as a rival, Arabian, Caliph who would be Britain's puppet—a sort of anti-Pope, to be used as French monarchs once employed the Pontiffs of Avignon.

This madcap scheme had to be kept secret, for in India, Britain ruled the largest Moslem population in the world, and were it to be known that the English were meddling in their religion, Mohammedans there and everywhere might rise in rage against Britain.

To his dying day, Lawrence kept the secret. In the introductory sentence to *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, he wrote that "some Englishmen, of whom Lord Kitchener was chief, believed that a rebellion of Arabs against Turks would enable England, while fighting Germany, simultaneously to defeat her ally Turkey." On the contrary, Kitchener's was the strategy of not fighting the two simultaneously, but of defeating Germany first. For most of his tenure at the War Office, he was not interested in pitting Arabs against Turks but in pitting Britain's Moslems against Russia's Moslems. He did not believe in Arab nationalism.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kitchener and his followers believed that in the Middle East religion was everything. But—and here, though misleading, Lawrence's introductory sentence is literally accurate—from the autumn of 1915 until the summer of 1916, they were tricked into believing otherwise. Retelling the details of it would take too long; suffice it to say that British officials in Cairo now believed—for about nine or ten months, until they realized that they had been deceived—that a vast nationalist Arab network existed behind Ottoman lines, including several hundred thousand Arab-speaking Ottoman troops (perhaps as much as half the Ottoman army); and that they would rebel against the Ottoman Empire and come over to the Allied side of the war at the call of the same Hussein of the Hejaz whom Kitchener had imagined to be a religious leader. Moreover Hussein was willing to do it; unbeknown to the British, he had discovered that the Ottoman government planned to depose him, so he had no choice but to rebel while he could.

In June 1916, supported by Abdullah, Feisal, and his other sons, Hussein proclaimed the Arab Revolt. It proved to be a dud. Hussein, it turned out, had no following at all. Moslems did not respond to his call, nor did Arabs. Under his banner—or rather, the one that a British official designed for him—those who rallied were closer to one thousand than to one hundred thousand, and they were tribesmen, not soldiers.

The Arab Revolt was supposed to rescue Britain, but instead Britain had to rescue it. Kitchener died before he could be blamed; but the reputation of Clayton, Storrs, and its other British sponsors in Cairo plummeted. In the autumn of 1916, Storrs journeyed to the Hejaz to see what could be salvaged from it. Clayton apparently wanted Lawrence—who was far more enterprising than Storrs—to go along, but could not get official permission; so Lawrence took his accumulated leave time, and traveled with Storrs as a vacationer. He had never been to Arabia before.

In the two years that followed, Lawrence was to be instrumental in keeping Hussein's movement alive and in directing it along lines that proved helpful—though not of any vital importance—to the Allied war effort. It was creditable service that, however, had no material effect on the conduct or outcome of the war. It was rather in shaping the peace that T. E. and the Hejaz movement that he inspired made their mark. Britain's new Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, wanted to take the whole of the Arab Middle East for the British Empire in the postwar world; and it was here that Lawrence, with a gift for self-glorification that served his country's purposes, was to prove so useful. Lawrence's real achievement in his two years with the Arabians in the World War was to invent a role for the Emir Hussein's small band: a role so visible, that commanded so much attention and proved so easy to exaggerate, that, when the war was over, Britain could make claims on Hussein's behalf, could pretend that she could not honor her promise to deliver Syria to France, because Hussein (said the British, lying outrageously) had won Syria in the war. Hussein was Britain's man; in pushing Hussein's claims, Lawrence was advancing Britain's.

At 7 A.M., October 16, 1916, the vessel bringing Storrs and Lawrence from Egypt docked at the port of Jeddah on the coast of Arabia. Lawrence—his own master, for he was on leave—made it his business to go upcountry to meet the sons of the Emir Hussein. Having done so, he became convinced that Feisal was the son who should lead the Arab cause. Lawrence also was converted to the views of the then-commander of Hussein's forces—a former officer in the Ottoman army, brought in by the British to try to make soldiers out of Hussein's tribesmen—that the bedouin of the Hejaz would be better employed in fighting a guerrilla war than in trying to fight a conventional one.

On his return from Arabia, Lawrence persuaded his superiors of these views. Consequently Prince Feisal became the Arab field commander; at Feisal's request, Lawrence was assigned to be British liaison officer with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

him; and the campaign they waged was a guerrilla one. Their object was to take the city of Medina, which lay to the north of them and blocked the Hejaz forces from riding north to Palestine, where the Middle East war was to be fought. To force Medina's surrender, Feisal's forces raided the single-track railway from Transjordanian Palestine that was Medina's sole source of reinforcements and supply. A British officer named Herbert Garland taught the Arabs how to dynamite the railroad, and Garland and other officers (including Lawrence, who later received most of the credit for it) went on to dynamite it repeatedly.

But the campaign failed. The Turks repaired the railway after each attack, and kept it running. Medina never fell to the Arabs or the Allies; its garrison held out until the end of the war, blocking the land road to Palestine.

So Lawrence thought of another plan. Since Feisal could not take Medina, he would go around it. Like others, Lawrence had noted the importance of Aqaba, the sleepy fishing port at the southern tip of Palestine. But Lawrence, who had seen aerial photographs of it, was alone in realizing that it could only be taken from behind: from the land, not the sea. Lawrence therefore purchased the support of a bedouin sheik—a desert raider of local renown—who executed the plan. When Aqaba fell to the sheik's war band, Lawrence, who rode with them, performed feats of endurance and courage in crossing enemy-held Palestine and Sinai to report the news to the new British commanding general, Edmund Allenby.

Now that the Arabs had a port in Palestine, the Royal Navy could bring Feisal and his followers to it by sea. Feisal no longer had to keep trying to fight his way there by land—which was a good thing, because Medina continued to stand in Feisal's way, and had Lawrence not thought of a way around it—the sea road—the Hejaz movement would have remained bottled up in the Hejaz for the rest of the war. As it was, Allenby, at Lawrence's request, sent ships to bring Feisal and about a thousand followers to Aqaba. There they were fleshed out by about twenty-five hundred Arab deserters from the Ottoman army to form a camel-cavalry corps that harassed the Turkish flank when Allenby's Egypt-based army invaded Palestine and marched on Syria.

The camel corps contributed something to the campaign, but much more to the pretense that Syria was liberated by the Arabs themselves. Pretense indeed: there were a million British troops fighting in the Middle East in 1918, and only thirty-five hundred Arabs, so on the face of it, it was Britain's war. In part to dramatize the role of the Arabs, Allenby's headquarters ordered the Australian and New Zealand (Anzac) cavalry spearheading the Allied advance to go around Damascus, the metropolis of Syria, not through it, so as to let Feisal take the city. But the plan miscarried. The Ottoman armies fled Damascus, and local Arabs unfriendly to Feisal took possession of it. Then Anzac units, unaware of orders or ignoring them, rode into the city and occupied it. The Allies now had it. Feisal and his cavalry were still three days away, while Lawrence, who had been transferred to the staff of the Australian commander, went A.W.O.L. and had to drive into the Allied-occupied city in his battered Rolls-Royce to find out what was going on.

A few days later, Feisal and a few hundred followers arrived in Damascus and staged a media event: a triumphal camelback entry into the city. Out of this material and some inspired lies, Lawrence fabricated the liberation of Damascus by Feisal and himself, in anonymous dispatches to the London *Times*, and in the several books written by him or with his help. Lawrence's account was backed up by the personal secretariat of Prime Minister David Lloyd George, whose instructions in briefing the press were to emphasize that the cities of Syria had been liberated by Feisal's forces, which were largely made up of Syrians; so that Syria had freed herself, and in conscience Britain could not turn her over to France.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sour grapes, distilled in the imagination of T. E. Lawrence, became an intoxicating brew for the twentieth century. The more Lawrence thought about his failure to destroy the Hejaz railroad or to take Medina, the more he realized he was better off not having done so. He had diverted Turkish resources, and had tied down tens of thousands of enemy troops, who had to be on the alert at all times because they did not know when or where he would attack.

Lawrence, working with the military thinker Liddell Hart, developed what became one of the most influential strategic theories of our time in a magazine essay that was later made into an article for the 1929 edition of the *Britannica*. To a world coming out of a senseless European trench war in which battles had been little more than mass butchery, Lawrence offered an attractive alternative strategy of warfare without battles. Instead of attacking enemies, he wrote, you go around them, immobilizing and isolating them, wearing them down as their sentries peer into the darkness searching for attackers who might or might not be lurking in the night.

Lawrence skirted the question of why Allenby's campaigns rather than his own had won the Middle Eastern war. He wrote that Allenby's "too-greatness deprived the Arab revolt of the opportunity" of defeating Turkey. In fact, Aqaba aside, the bedouins with whom Lawrence rode were never able to defeat the Turks at all; it took a million-man British army to deliver a knockout blow to the Ottoman Empire—a blow the hit-and-run bedouins were not remotely capable of delivering themselves.

It was to a different kind of war that Lawrence's strategy applied. Lawrence did not know how to destroy or even defeat an enemy, so that his strategy was of no use against a country fighting for survival: a country that will not or cannot give up or surrender and has to be crushed by force. Lawrence taught how to wear down an opponent: a strategy that will win only against an enemy that will surrender if tired, an enemy, therefore, fighting to hold on to something it can afford to give up. In situations to which it applies, the advantage of Lawrence's strategy of attrition is that it permits a smaller, weaker force to sap the resources—and therefore the will to continue fighting—of a Great Power that cannot be defeated face-to-face in the field.

So Lawrence's strategy suits the particular needs of rebels against colonial powers; and his writings have stimulated the thinking of revolutionary strategists throughout the century and are studied alongside the works of Mao Zedong, the campaigns of Vo Nguyen Giap, and the theories of Che Guevara. It is an aspect of Lawrence's special genius to have created a theory that would be so relevant in the years to come. And it is a typical paradox of his career that he, the hero of British imperialism, should have become an inspirer of the Third World's revolt against the imperial West.

It was an ambitious young American showman and jack-of-all-trades, Lowell Thomas, who invented "Lawrence of Arabia" and made him into one of the world's first film stars. Thomas was about twenty-five at the end of 1917, when he raised enough money to send himself and a cameraman to the Middle East in search of a story with romance and local color that he could sell. He had been pointed toward the Middle East by Britain's information director, John Buchan, author of the novel *Greenmantle* (1916), in which a young Oxford scholar in native turban leads a Moslem uprising against the Ottoman Empire.

Almost immediately on arriving in the Middle East, Thomas found his man. At first even Thomas questioned the far-fetched tales that Lawrence told him, but (according to Thomas) T. E. "would laugh with glee and reply: 'History isn't made up of truth, anyhow, so why worry?'" Later, Lawrence was to remark: "On the whole I prefer lies to truth, particularly where they concern me." Lawrence claimed that the fictions he passed off as accounts of his adventures satisfied his "craving for self-expression in some imaginative form"; and when a friend objected,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he countered with "What does it matter? History is but a series of accepted lies."

Lawrence, with his romantic fantasies, and Lowell Thomas, with his hyperbole and ballyhoo, together concocted a story that took the world by storm. Using the photos as lantern slides as he narrated, Thomas created a show that toured the globe and broke entertainment-business records. In London alone, a million people came to see it.

To an audience sickened for years by the sordid grime and hopeless slaughter of trench warfare on the western front, Lowell Thomas brought a hero in gleaming white robes who rode to victory. Thomas's story of a young Oxonian in native garb becoming a warrior-prince of the desert, to some extent prefigured in *Greenmantle* and A. E. W. Mason's *Four Feathers*, struck a deeply responsive chord, much like that struck by Edgar Rice Burroughs in *Tarzan*. It was as though the story had been there all along, waiting to be told; and the role of Oxford's desert prince was there, too, waiting for Lawrence to play it.

But the story was false fundamentally. Neither T. E. nor any of his colleagues could have passed for Arab in the Middle East. As Lawrence admitted in 1927 to his biographer, the poet Robert Graves, "I've never heard an Englishman speak Arabic well enough to be taken for a native of any part of the Arabic-speaking world, for five minutes."

Mrs. George Bernard Shaw, a confidante of Lawrence's, to whom he confessed much that was false, once exclaimed in exasperation that "he is such an *infernal* liar!"; but her husband disagreed. T. E. "was a born and incorrigible actor," wrote Bernard Shaw. "He was not a liar. He was an actor."

The celebrity brought about by Lowell Thomas's "Lawrence of Arabia" show propelled T. E. into the political limelight. Long before George Murphy became a U.S. Senator or Ronald Reagan became America's President, Lawrence was a sort of actor in politics. He threw himself into his roles wholeheartedly. Dressed in the uniform of a British officer, he spoke cynically of how he would manipulate the peoples of the Middle East, but wearing his native robes, he was the only prominent Englishman in favor of genuine independence for the Arabs.

In 1919 Lawrence was Feisal's confederate at the Peace Conference, maneuvering to get Hussein's son the crown of an independent Syria and causing some on the British side to wonder whose team he was on. In 1920, T. E. became a public critic of Britain's Middle East policy. Attacking the central justification of imperialism—that native peoples are incapable of self-rule—he wrote to the *Times* that "Merit is no qualification for freedom." Of the Arabs in Syria and what is now Iraq, he wrote that "They did not risk their lives in battle to change masters, to become British subjects or French citizens, but to win a show of their own."

In 1921-22, Lawrence was called back into public service, despite objections that he was unconventional, chronically insubordinate, and not a team player. Appointed an assistant by the new Colonial Secretary, Winston Churchill, Lawrence helped Churchill to turn around the government's approach and devise a changed Middle East policy that gave Feisal the newly created kingdom of Iraq and gave Transjordanian Palestine (now Jordan) to Feisal's brother Abdullah. Lawrence was proud of the settlement, and admired Churchill for making it possible; he remarked repeatedly that the Arabs now had been given what they had been promised —and more.

But while his public life prospered, his private life disintegrated. He was overcome by guilt. One can only guess at the reasons. Guessing was what he wanted us to do; he only flirted at telling. He confessed frequently, variously, and inconsistently. In this he was much like a ballerina widely known in New York City during the 1940s, who required the services of a particular psychiatrist because he was the best, but dared not tell him about herself because he was a notorious gossip. Her solution was to tell the doctor invented stories of what she had done: things that, to her way of thinking, were ex-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

actly as sick or as bad as what she had actually done, so that the doctor's analysis of her fictional behavior would apply equally well to her real behavior. That is more or less what Lawrence did, providing enough employment to psychohistorians to last well beyond the turn of the next century.

Whatever the reason, Lawrence discovered a need to be physically beaten. His descent into the sexual underworld of sadomasochism was dizzyingly dangerous. While still very much in the public eye as a Middle East peacemaker, he took to attending flagellation parties in Chelsea organized by a German panderer who went by the name of Bluebeard. Soon Bluebeard was offering his confessions for publication, and Lawrence was driven to use government connections to stop him.

Seemingly driven by inner forces, T. E. made a sudden turn in life. He had been a romantic, writing of the peoples of the Middle East as though he were an artist and they, his work; seeking to make them in some sense an extension of his personality. But in 1922-23, he turned his back on such nineteenth-century aspirations, in favor of yearnings more appropriate to the eleventh or twelfth centuries. His aim—or at least so he wished his public to believe—was to annihilate his individuality: to merge his personality, as medieval man had done, in collective efforts. In that quest, under assumed names to achieve anonymity, he cloistered himself as a simple trooper in the Tank Corps, and later, in the airforce. But whereas monks of the church had been capable of mortifying the flesh without assistance, Lawrence brought along with him a hired hand whose duties were to beat him—in accordance with letters from a fictitious relative, produced by Lawrence, detailing his latest sins and prescribing punishments for them.

The public knew nothing of this. What the public knew was that he was pursuing a life inspired by some vague and undenominational spiritualism—the sort of thing the twentieth century finds immensely appealing. Moreover his attempts to avoid publicity, journalists, and photographers—like the similar efforts in later years of Greta Garbo and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis—kept him constantly in the news.

Though he wrote a distinctive novel, *The Mint*, and an ever-popular prose translation of the *Odyssey*, the work in which Lawrence made his bid for immortality was one in which he told of his wartime adventures: *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. He wrote it—confusingly, since it dealt with real events—as a novel, intending it (he told Edward Garnett) "to make an English fourth" to an exclusive bookshelf that contained only *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and *Moby-Dick*. In writing to E. M. Forster, he lengthened his bookshelf, omitting *Zarathustra*, but adding *War and Peace*, *Leaves of Grass*, *Don Quixote*, and Rabelais.

It has been greatly praised. "It ranks with the greatest books ever written in the English language," said Winston Churchill, who was not alone in that view. But if it ranks so high, it can only be because it was written in a century in which its flaws increasingly are regarded as virtues.

It is the work of an author unwilling to tell which of his statements are fact and which fiction, and unable to decide what story, whether fact or fiction, he wants to tell. So he outlines several stories, but they contradict one another.

The title is from a quotation that Lawrence loved and long had wanted to use as a title for something. But it did not suit this book. "Seven Pillars of Wisdom" refers to the achievement of wisdom: wisdom made complete and perfect. But the book of which it is the title tells no such tale. So the title tells one story, the text, another.

Lawrence prefaces the book with a poem that Robert Graves helped him write and that tells a story of its own. In the poem, the hero strives to win a victory for the sake of someone or something he loves, does in fact win, but finds the victory hollow because the someone or something for whom it was won has died. An afternote repeats this account.

But that story, too, is inconsistent with those told in the text. In the original first

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

chapter of the text, deleted at the suggestion of Bernard Shaw, but subsequently published, Lawrence told two more stories, which were mutually inconsistent. In one of them, the Arabs had been used as pawns by the British during the war, and he was guilty of acting for his government in this, and of making promises to the Arabs that he knew his government had no intention of keeping. In the second story, he was not guilty; his government had duped him as well as the Arabs. The idealistic young men of whom he was one, he wrote, had won a bright triumph, but then "the old men came out again and took our victory."

In a later chapter he amplified this second story. The Arabs, he wrote, "had begun to dream of liberty," and a small group of Englishmen ("We were not many; and nearly all of us rallied around Clayton . . .") had determined to help them achieve it. In addition to Gilbert Clayton, he listed Aubrey Herbert, Sir Mark Sykes, David Hogarth, and several others associated with the Arab Bureau in Cairo—"all of the creed," he wrote. He claimed that "we meant to break into the accepted halls of English foreign policy, and build a new people in the East."

That was factually false; that was not their creed. Apart from Lawrence himself, none of them believed in an Arab nation or in Arab independence. Aubrey Herbert was pro-Ottoman Empire and happy with the notion of Arabs being ruled by Turks. Sir Mark Sykes was an author of the Sykes-Picot-Sazanov Agreement, the treaty that Lawrence regarded as a betrayal of the Arabs and the promises made to them. Hogarth and Clayton both believed that Arabs could not govern themselves and ought to be ruled by Europeans.

Lawrence was equally muddled about his own role. At different places in the book he makes three claims: that he secretly intended, when the moment came, to keep faith with the Arabs by defeating his own government's machinations; that, on the contrary, he had lost his soul in the greed for victory and did not intend to keep faith with the Arabs; and that, again on the contrary, betraying the Arabs was justified by the overriding need to win the war. In other words: he did not betray the Arabs, and that was good; he did betray the Arabs, and that was bad; and he did betray the Arabs, and that was good.

In reality the issue was false. Hussein had never trusted Britain, and therefore had not been deceived; he never relied on the heavily qualified phrases in which British officials suggested they would do great things for the Arab peoples after the war. Feisal knew of the secret treaty in which Britain supposedly betrayed the Arabs to France; Lawrence had told him of it. Each on his own (for they betrayed one another, too), Hussein and Feisal had negotiated to betray the Allies and go back to the Ottoman side. T. E. told Liddell Hart that "Feisal was definitely 'selling' us"; so he knew his one-sided story of betrayal was fiction.

In any event, the story had become moot. Since the events recounted in *Seven Pillars*, Churchill, with Lawrence's help, had negotiated new arrangements for the Middle East that T. E. believed provided full justice for the Arab claims. So in the end there was no betrayal, and *Seven Pillars*—a cry of political guilt—was politically out of date long before it was published.

But as literature it broke new ground. In the *Ashenden* stories, Somerset Maugham took up Lawrence's theme that the role of an intelligence agent, even for our side, is morally tarnished. Others then took it up, too, in a line that leads to the novels of John Le Carré. Similarly Lawrence's story of officers in the field (such as himself) acting in good faith, but then discovering that their own political or military or intelligence leaders are at least as cynical and immoral as the enemy's, is one recounted time and again in American popular literature and films of the past few decades. The exploration of the moral ambiguity, or even moral guilt, of our own side, a province taken as his domain by Graham Greene, can be traced to *Seven Pillars*.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Lawrence's obsession with guilt as a personal theme runs parallel to the political one throughout *Seven Pillars*, which begins in a Nietzschean spirit with the author's observation that in the extreme circumstances of the desert war he and his companions were driven to actions that in normal circumstances would be immoral. Did their exceptional circumstances license them to transcend the moral code? The author—it is his essential weakness that he will never commit himself—gives no clear answer.

The emotional center of the book is a story that Lawrence began telling in 1919, giving several different accounts of it, that explained why he had whip marks on his body. Lawrence claimed that, unknown to others, he had been taken prisoner for a time on the night of November 21-22, 1917, in a place called Deraa, and was homosexually assaulted, bayoneted, and beaten by command of a sadistic Turkish commander. Lawrence told it in several versions, admitting that some of them were untrue; and there has always been a strong case that the whole tale was false. That case is strengthened by the apparent discovery of documentary evidence detailed in the Lawrence James biography of Lawrence. It seems that the official War Diary kept by a British army unit shows that Lawrence and a fellow officer, Colonel Joyce, were in Aqaba, some four hundred miles away from Deraa, on November 21 and 22; and that the memory of a Lieutenant Samuel Brodie, who met Lawrence and Joyce in Aqaba then, confirms this.

Does it matter if the Deraa story is fantasy? or that Lawrence misrepresents the politics of his characters? or that the three reasons he gives to deny that the Anzacs liberated Damascus are—all of them—false as well as inconsistent?

If *Seven Pillars* is indeed a novel, it is disqualified from greatness because its author fails to pay the price of admission: he refuses to run the risk of saying who he is or what he believes or what story he is telling. As history, it lies and distorts; T. E. knew that, but somehow did not feel guilty—here, where he should have felt it—for giving his Arabs credit for what the Australian/New Zealand cavalry in fact had accomplished.

Nietzsche, an intellectual hero of Lawrence's who taught that history consists of myths rather than facts, provided a link with André Malraux, who placed Lawrence, the writer and thinker, beside the exemplary twentieth-century hero, the Arab nationalist, and the guerrilla strategist. Malraux, who seems to have known about Lawrence since 1920, modeled himself after Lawrence and wrote of himself as T. E.'s spiritual son.

Malraux became obsessed by Lawrence. The parallel ran closer than Malraux knew, for, believing Lawrence's lies, Malraux himself lied by claiming to have accomplished similar feats. Malraux falsely claimed to have been a leader of the Chinese revolution, in Canton in 1925 and in Shanghai in 1927, although (other than a trip to Hong Kong) he had never been in China at all. Just as Lawrence sat down to write a novel about his leadership of the illusory Arab revolt as a "fourth" to *Karamazov*, *Zarathustra*, and *Moby-Dick*, so Malraux sat down to write a masterpiece flowing from his claimed participation in the Chinese revolution, *Man's Fate*, as a "fifth gospel" to Lawrence and the other three. Like Lawrence, Malraux did perform acts of valor, but also claimed to have performed others that he had not.

Lawrence's boyhood dream—doing great things both "active and reflective," as he told Liddell Hart—became Malraux's adult creed of the intellectual committed to action, a creed that also informed the works of Ernest Hemingway (if in somewhat debased form), and of which Lawrence was at once the inspirer and the exemplar. Liddell Hart, while writing that "the perfect balance may be unattainable," claimed of T. E. that "no man has come so close to equal greatness in action and reflection." In the world of the 1920s and 1930s, as fascism, Nazism, and Communism rose from the embers of a Europe ravaged by war, social strife, and depression, Malraux portrayed Lawrence as the last liberal hero of the West.

In the first chapter of a book he was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

writing about T. E.—a book, the existence of which has been doubted for years, but which is now scheduled for publication—Malraux quotes Lawrence as saying "somewhere there is an absolute, that's the only thing that counts; and I haven't succeeded in finding it. Hence this pointless existence." That is the great theme that Malraux wanted to explore: Lawrence's quest for meaning in a universe in which, as Nietzsche's Zarathustra proclaimed, "*God is dead!*" In this conception, Lawrence became an existentialist hero; and both Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir are said to have been fascinated by him.

T. E. died, like Albert Camus, to whom he bore resemblances, in a traffic accident. Speeding as usual, he veered on his motorbike to avoid hitting two children, and was thrown over the handlebars to his death. It was 1935; parliamentary regimes all over Europe were falling to men on horseback whose military dictatorships promised national greatness; and there were forces interested in using T. E. as their figurehead in coming to power. So there were rumors that he had been murdered, and others that—tempted by the immortality that fame as a dictator would bring, but unwilling to compromise his democratic ideals—Lawrence had crashed deliberately, committing suicide.

A few years later, Liddell Hart wrote of Lawrence: "Not long ago the young men were talking, the young poets writing, of him in a Messianic strain—as the man who could, if he would, be a light to lead stumbling humanity out of its troubles. . . . [I]t is difficult to see any way, compatible with his philosophy, in which he could have played such a role. . . . But at least I can say that, so far as I knew him, he seemed to come nearer than any man to fitness for such power—in a state that I would care to live in."

In the one meeting he claimed to have had with T. E.—but which it now seems Malraux invented—Malraux provides a clue as to Lawrence's enduring interest and appeal. "He was extraordinarily elegant. With an elegance of today, not of his own time. A roll-neck sweater, for example, a kind of nonchalance and distance."

It was his special quality: he does not age or date. He belongs to today. Even his theory of strategy is as current as this morning's headlines. He had a genius for taking the road we would want to follow. His attitudes and interests anticipated those of the 1960s, the 1970s, the 1980s, the 1990s; and so did his style. He was casual. He was cool. He never stopped being young. He shared the modern crazes: motorbikes; speed; celebrity.

Like public figures of today, he was launched by the news media and the entertainment industry, now so intertwined and pervasive. In writing fiction in which real characters make an appearance, he looked ahead to the popularity in our time of novels, television series, and films that are situated on the frontier between fact and fiction; in some ways *Seven Pillars* is like a Costa-Gavras movie—a setting of apparent historical truth into which untruths are inserted without being labeled as such.

As a citizen of the twentieth century, Lawrence valued history little and entertainment a great deal. Fiction is stranger than truth, and T. E. found it more fun: due to him, there are those who believe that Damascus was liberated in 1918 by a band of Arabs led by someone who looked like Peter O'Toole.

Though he wrote and read a great deal, his imagination was more graphic than literary, more concerned with images than with words: that too is a hallmark of this part of the twentieth century. He was at least as much concerned about the design of a book as about its contents, and as a young man planned to found a private press. A sometime vegetarian; self-exiled, and engaged in a vaguely spiritual quest; like the generations beginning with 1960, he wanted to rediscover artisanry, craftsmanship, handmade work.

His themes were those popular with today's readers: confusion of sexual orientation; illicit sex practices; and identity crisis. He was an intelligence agent—and we adore

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

spy stories. When he sped to his death, he left behind the sort of ending that most intrigues the twentieth century—the officially denied conspiracy—and, as with President Kennedy's assassination, there were troubling details that did not fit with the official account.

Bernard Shaw wrote that "through an accident in his teens Lawrence never grew up. He looked like a boy. His great abilities and interests were those of a highly gifted boy. He died, not as a great thinker, but as a boy tearing along on a motorcycle at 80 miles an hour." Only a fine line separates an existentialist hero from what the London press has taken to calling "a crazy, mixed-up kid"; and T. E. was so much of his century that he could be said to be on either side of the line.

Lawrence could not have been further from the towering figures of his time. The great men of the century—Winston Churchill, Charles de Gaulle—were creatures of another age, born out of time. The awe they inspired, and their ability to impose themselves, derived in large part from qualities and resources they brought with them from the past.

T. E., in contrast, was of his time and ours. Of all the public figures of the twentieth century, across a wide range of interests, issues, and attitudes, he best expresses the century, and it is best studied through him. He is a prism through which the spectrum of twentieth-century tastes, fads, foibles, insights, and outlooks can be sorted out. If his life were a work of art, some collector a thousand years hence might take it down from its shelf, saying: "Now here is a pure example of twentieth century—a perfect specimen!" For that, if for nothing else, T. E. Lawrence is, and will remain, important.

It is the answer to his prayer. Lawrence was haunted by the knowledge that life is ephemeral. Insofar as anything endures, he believed, it is the art of a Dostoevsky or the fame of an Alexander, and he aspired to both; indeed he wanted them so much that he cheated to get them. *Seven Pillars* is a cheat either as a novel—for a novelist's job is to decide what he wants to say, but T. E. would not run the risk of doing that—or as history, for it does not tell the truth; and the campaigns of Lawrence of Arabia were a cheat because T. E. fabricated them. So it may not be for his works or deeds, considerable though their influence has been, that he will be known in distant ages.

It is as a voice of our time that he is certain to be heard. As other men lust for power or wealth or women, he craved to be noticed and to be remembered—and he was and he is, and he will be.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Chamfort: an introduction

by Joseph Epstein

Admirers of the form known as the aphorism have always been few and aphorists of the first class, naturally enough, many fewer. The aphorism is an acquired taste; it provides something substantial, tangy, yet more than a touch sour, rather like the best Greek olives. Aphorisms are generalizations of universal, or nearly universal, significance, written out of one's experience, or more likely disenchantment with one's experience. If proverbs tend to tell us that we shouldn't expect people to be better than they are, aphorisms are more likely to tell us just how bad they can be. "We all have strength enough," writes La Rochefoucauld, nicely striking the characteristic note of the aphorist, "to endure the troubles of others."

Those among us who take pleasure in aphorisms do not, then, come to them for cheering up. They can of course be immensely amusing, which the best among them generally are, and this, to be sure, can provide its own sort of cheer. But the bone truth is that aphorisms, while they need not be bitter, are usually better for being so. The closest synonym to an aphorism is a maxim, and sometimes the two words are used interchangeably, though the notion of advice that clings to the word "maxim" does not cling to the aphorism, which has tended to seem freer to observe the pretentious, ridiculous, paradoxical, and (sometimes though not very often) surprisingly majestic quality of human conduct.

The aphorist is by nature, if not always by birth, aristocratic. He is a man who does not bother to argue or to explain; he asserts, and, if he has got it right, his assertion is sufficient unto the day. Implicit in the brevity of the aphorist's assertions is an impatience with logical proof. He also operates at a high level of generality. "Great thoughts are always general," wrote Dr. Johnson, "and consist in positions not limited by exceptions, and in descriptions not descending to minuteness." When the aphorist stylishly remarks upon the conduct of human behavior—and without style, that preservative of literature, the aphorist has no hope of his works living beyond the time it takes to write them—he assumes that readers as worldly as he will recognize instantly that what he says is true. If not, too bad, and, come to think of it, not too surprising, either. One doesn't, after all, expect the butterfly being pinned to the velvet cloth to appreciate the elegance of the lepidopterist's efforts.

Universal though the truth of the aphorism attempts to be, it is very far from impersonal. On the contrary, the true aphorist leaves the stamp of himself, through his style, on each of his aphorisms. Scarcely could it be otherwise, for the literary act that is the aphorism is one in which the author sets out to tell you precisely what he thinks. Usually what he thinks is opposed to the conventional opinion on most subjects. In asserting his own truths, the aphorist separates himself from the platitudes and received wis-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dom on every subject that he touches. Nietzsche, who was himself partial to the form of the aphorism, once noted that every idea has its autobiography. So, one might add, does every aphorism. "The artist doesn't see things as they are, but as he is," an anonymous aphorism runs, and it applies nicely to that artist in the briefest of all prose forms, the aphorist. His intention, like that of all artists, is to convince us that the way he sees things is the way they truly are.

Not long ago, as the editor of an intellectual quarterly, I received a batch of aphorisms from a man of whom I had never heard before, but whom I took to be in his forties. He had sent these aphorisms to me for publication. They were not at all bad, his aphorisms, and I found myself writing to tell him that I would indeed publish them if only his name were Winston Churchill or Charles de Gaulle, but I could not do so as long as his name was what it was—it was, such is the heavy irony life dispenses, Smith—nor, I quickly added, would I be able to publish them if they were written by someone named Joseph Epstein.

My logic here—if logic be the right word—is that the aphorism has become so old-fashioned a form that, in order to have one's aphorisms published, one really ought to be well known to begin with. It was no longer possible, I felt, simply to have thought long and written with high style and concision about general subjects, and expect to find someone willing to publish one's lucubrations. To publish fewer than a fairly large body of someone's aphorisms, or at least those of someone who is not otherwise known to the world, seemed to me a bit beside the point. The point here is that the composition of powerful aphorisms implies a life behind them of the most varied and interesting experience. If one wants to publish aphorisms today, it is best, as a precondition, to become very famous before doing so.

The honor roll of the great aphorists requires only a very small scroll. The fingers of both hands can almost include all those who can make some claim to have a place in world literature. Let me count their names: La Rochefoucauld, La Bruyère, Vauvenargues, Pascal, Joubert, Rivarol; switching from French to Teutonic culture now, let us add G. C. Lichtenberg, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Karl Kraus; and a lone Romanian, a contemporary named E. M. Cioran. William Hazlitt wrote aphorisms, jolly dark ones too—"The youth is better than the old age of friendship" and "I believe in the theoretical benevolence and the practical malignity of man"—but not enough of them are superior. Emerson is often included among the ranks of the great aphorists, but, to my taste, he is too vatic, not to say uplifting, though I am prepared to say boring. But then Emerson did not, strictly speaking, write aphorisms but instead in an aphoristic style, which allows anthologists to pluck discrete aphorisms from the often heavy pudding of his prose.

My list of aphorists shows the form to have been taken up overwhelmingly by Frenchmen. A certain amount of sense inheres in this fact of literary history. If vengeance, as the Italians say, is a dish best served cold, for the French disgust is best served cool and with disdain, and cool disdain is perhaps the key note for the aphorist. When Germans express disgust—as in Schopenhauer or Nietzsche—it tends, like so many things German, to be rather overdone. Apparently neither the English nor the Americans have felt disgust with sufficient intensity to produce a strong line of aphorists, which is a testament either to their societies or to the naïveté of their writers.

I have delayed including the name Chamfort (1740-1794) among the great aphorists until now because his place among them is not an altogether understandable one. "A passionate man," an aphorism of Stendhal's has it, "is never witty." Yet Chamfort, one of the great aphorists of his own or any other age, gives the lie to this particular aphorism. Few men have been wittier, and perhaps none more passionate, if one measure of passion be sustained agitated feelings. ("Few have any idea," Chamfort wrote, "how

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

much wit it takes never to be ridiculous.") Even for an aphorist, Chamfort could be very dark. In his biography of Chamfort,[1] Claude Arnaud quotes the Abbé Morellet on his frequent conversations with this extraordinary man:

> There were two features to his conversation. It always touched on people and never on things, and it was constantly misanthropic and excessively denigrating. The turns of phrase with which he demonstrated his hatred for humanity in general as well as his specific aversions were captivating in their originality . . . but I left Auteuil hundreds of times with a heavy soul—after mornings of listening to him recount anecdote after anecdote for two hours, inventing epigram after epigram with indefatigable ease—as though I were leaving the scene of an execution.

Yet Chamfort has always had his admirers, and they have made up a most impressive literary cast. Tell me who admires you, Sainte-Beuve somewhere says, and I shall tell you who you are. Schopenhauer much admired Chamfort and Nietzsche did so even more. Stendhal read him with appreciation. Everything Chamfort wrote, said Cocteau, that connoisseur of tomorrow, "seems as if it were written yesterday." Camus thought him *un écrivain classique* and felt it possible to speak of him without paradox as a novelist. Closer to our own day the poet W. S. Merwin has translated a generous selection of Chamfort's aphorisms, characters, and anecdotes under the title *Products of the Perfected Civilization.*[2] E. M. Cioran has spoken of the impulses of gratitude that he feels toward Chamfort—and Job.

Yet Chamfort's remains considerably less than a household name. Even among people who know and care about literature, he is not always known; or if his name is known, what he stands for is a bit blurred. Part of the problem is that Chamfort was both a political figure—though a minor and for the most part behind-the-scenes one—and a writer, and that much of what he wrote in the earlier phases of his career—plays, pamphlets, criticism, poetry—today isn't quite negligible. Adding to the complication is that his career is parted by that most tumultuous of events of the eighteenth century, or perhaps of modern history itself, the French Revolution, and so one must consider, in effect, not one but three Chamforts: the careerist of the ancien régime, the flamingly enthusiastic revolutionist, and the dispossessed and disenchanted figure on whom the revolution turned.

What anyone with the least biographical interest wants to know about an aphorist he admires is whether he had more wit than character—or, to put the case more positively, whether his character was commensurate with his wit. This question must often have occurred to Chamfort himself. This exquisite writer—with all the strengths and weaknesses that the adjective implies—was a misfit: in some ways a misfit by fortune, in some ways by nature, and in more important ways a self-made misfit. Chamfort was a man who made and unmade himself, not once but several times in the course of his life.

The first and crucially significant fact about Chamfort is that he wasn't born Chamfort—a name he took up later in life—but was born out of wedlock, to an aristocratic mother and an obscure cleric, in 1740, in Clermont-Ferrand, whence also derived Pascal. The child was, in effect, farmed out to the family of a grocer and his wife, who had lost a child of their own born on the same day as he. He was raised by this family under the name Sébastien Roch Nicolas. The boy learned who his true mother was when he was seven or eight. This knowledge established him for life in his ambiguous, highly charged relation with the aristocracy

---

1 *Chamfort*, by Claude Arnaud, translated from the French by Deke Dusinberre, is forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press.

2 *Products of the Perfected Civilization: Selected Writings of Chamfort*, translated from the French and with an introduction by W. S. Merwin, was published by Macmillan in 1969 and reprinted in 1984 by North Point Press (284 pages, $12.50 paper).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the ancien régime, and with an early notion of how far people will go to maintain appearances. It left the young boy with a sense of himself as a victim, but a victim always with a high opinion of himself. He grew up, consequently, with great ambition and an ample grudge. Mediating between the two —between his aspirations and his anger— became the story not alone of his career but of his life.

"Careers open to the talents" was scarcely the motto of the ancien régime, but talent of a certain kind, combined with ambition, could, with luck, find its way. Chamfort, clearly, did. He was a brilliant student, and won various medals in competitions open to students across France. He was adept at languages, ancient and modern, and the clerical principal of the school in Paris at which he was educated thought he might make an excellent priest. According to Claude Arnaud, Chamfort (still young Nicolas) quickly disabused the principal of that notion. "I'll never be a priest," he informed him. "I'm too fond of sleep, philosophy, women, honor and real fame; and not fond enough of quarrels, hypocrisy, honors, and money." Arnaud also tells us that Chamfort even then considered himself a genius; and later in life he would write that "geniuses belong to no family, no century, no nation—they have neither ancestors nor descendants."

Few things so improve the appearance as a good opinion of oneself. But in this realm Chamfort stood in little need of improvement. As a young man, he was devastatingly handsome and very well turned out. A woman with whom he slept reported: "You think he's only Adonis, yet he's Hercules"—a remark every young man would like on his calling card. As with many a delicious remark in that day, it got around, accruing to the young Chamfort's reputation for charm and—how to put it?—dexterity. In an age of artifice, he created himself with careful attention to detail: changed his name while leaving the truth about his birth a mystery; dropped two years off his age to create the impression that he was even more precocious than he was; acquired the knack of gaining the patronage of the most important personages of the time; "and mastered the art," as Arnaud puts, of "knowing exactly when to go too far."

In short, the young Chamfort was turning into a man of precisely the kind the mature Chamfort would despise. Do we have a case here, in Chamfort's ability easily to insinuate himself into the most select segments of society, of the well-known Groucho Complex, which holds that there can be no point in joining any club whose standards are so low that they are willing to accept oneself as a member? Only in part, I think, for to get Chamfort right one has to add the elements of a heightened critical sensibility that led into something akin to self-hatred at the sign of his willingness to abase himself before his putative superiors.

Chamfort quickly enough grasped, then mastered, the artificiality of Parisian life. Sainte-Beuve says of the young Joseph Joubert, a near contemporary of Chamfort's, "he lived there [in Paris] as one lived then: he chatted." So did Chamfort—brilliantly. He also wrote a rather callow play, *La Jeune indienne*, that received the approval of Voltaire. D'Alembert extended him his patronage. He corresponded with Rousseau, the one writer among the great French prose writers of the age—and the age was clearly one for prose, not poetry—whose work he seems unstintingly to have admired. He understood that literary talent meant entree into the highest society, yet he also sensed, as Arnaud puts it, that "high society appears to respect those who appear to hold it in contempt." Contempt Chamfort did not have to feign, especially for aristocrats, whose pretenses to superiority he despised.

Along with literary talent, the art of seduction had its utility in the Paris of Chamfort's day. Laclos, author of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, was born only a year later than Chamfort. It is perhaps well to recall that Chamfort wrote the aphorism around which Laclos might be said to have constructed his novel: "Love, such as it exists in high society,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

is merely the exchange of whims and the contact of skins." He himself knew no shortage of women who were ready to transact precisely this exchange, among them the actress Mlle. Giurmand, who was famous for the perfection of her bosom and who did her makeup each day before the portrait that Fragonard had painted of her.

Chamfort often used his amatory powers to revenge himself on aristocrats for what he felt were social slights. His own beauty, as Arnaud nicely puts it, "was one injustice that Chamfort bore lightly." But then, at the age of twenty-five, he was struck by one of fate's mysterious darts and in a single shot his own good looks and his health were gone. A still unknown disease hit him—some allege it was venereal—affecting his nerves, his complexion, his chest, his bladder, his eyes, leaving him unable to read or to walk, and turning him over to the horror of eighteenth-century medical treatment. His elegant appearance, his youthful air, were destroyed. He took to his rooms. His onward and upward progress ceased. His already advanced misanthropy had found its autobiographical *raison d'être*.

Those who have written about Chamfort differ on the question of the origin of his dark views: some say they are owed to the socially demeaning facts of his birth, some to this devastating illness, some to a superior lucidity let loose in a rotten age. About the darkness of these views there can be no controversy. After the unexplained attack of his illness, he steeled himself. Removed from the sex wars—in which, as he would later write, "the heart must break or turn to bronze"—he devoted himself more earnestly to literature. But try as he might, he was unable to kill entirely the aspirations that seemed inseparable from his character. Chamfort remained a man who desired everything and detested himself for his own desires. His was a case, perhaps not all that uncommon, of eating your cake and hating it, too.

To be sure, there are tableaux of Chamfort that soften the view of him as the always angry young man, in a state of perpetual perturbation, the persistent good hater. In the pages of Arnaud's biography, we discover Chamfort stroking Mme Helvetius's angora cats, who were fed on a strict diet of chicken breasts; meeting Benjamin Franklin, who himself had an idea or two on the art of seduction; actually in love for a brief time with Marthe Buffon, a woman older than he who died only six months after their relationship had got underway in earnest and of whom a contemporary said that Chamfort had loved her "as ardently as a mistress, as tenderly as a mother." A not uncommon sight in the rarified circles in which he traveled was that of Chamfort holding forth, talking brilliantly, captivating everyone. One witness to his talk, who for a long stretch saw him daily, said that he never repeated himself, another that he made people laugh and think simultaneously.

These scenes of the gentle life are counterposed against the almost endless internecine literary squabbles for which the time was famous, a time of impressive ingratitude, relentless jealousy, and devastating putdowns. (Of Jean-François de La Harpe, a rival and exceedingly rivalrous man of letters, Chamfort said that he frequently "hid his vices behind his faults"—a very crisp little two-cushion shot.) Chamfort took a good thumping from critics for his second play, *Mustapha et Zéangir*. Owing to this thorough shellacking, Chamfort acquired paranoia, the disease of the intellectuals, of serious dimensions. Given the general disputatiousness, not to say backstabbing, of intellectual life in the ancien régime, and the non-metaphorical backstabbing in the revolution that followed hard upon it, his paranoia would serve Chamfort well. So would it serve his aphorisms, which he began writing around this time—roughly 1777, when he was thirty-seven—for it was in these aphorisms that he first dropped the dry and artificial style of neo-classicism in which all his public writing had been composed and now wrote as he spoke, lucidly, beautifully, devastatingly.

"Genius," noted Ortega y Gasset, "is the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ability to invent one's own occupation." By this standard, Chamfort qualifies as a genius, even though it is a bit difficult to say what, precisely, his occupation was. Continually—one is almost ready to say continuously—attracted and repelled by the rewards of society, he fairly regularly ducked in and out of it, but in 1780, when he was forty, he resolved no longer to write for the public. (The following year, 1781, he was finally elected to the Académie Française, to which he had been seeking membership for many years.) But now he planned to rusticate himself. He was a man who could live well enough on his despair, bemoaning the fate of the literary man in his time, contemptuous of the class whose approval he also sought—that, along with the various government pensions he had accrued, made life, however dark, endurable.

Arnaud remarks that Chamfort was "born at the wrong time." He tells us that he and Laclos perhaps shared "the intuition that their half-century would be remembered less for its literature than for its mores and fashions, ideas and conversation." Chamfort himself noted, in one of his aphorisms: "Reading through the memoirs and literary monuments of the century of Louis XIV, one finds even in the bad company of the age something that is missing in the good of our own." The period tossed up odd talents such as Rétif de la Bretonne (author of *Paris Nights*) and Chamfort himself; today the only writer of the period who is still considered of central importance is Rousseau and perhaps Diderot. Yet Chamfort's life was not so much divided as cleaved by that event of singular significance, the French Revolution —an event that simultaneously shortened his life and lent him part of the significance he has today. Without the intercession of the French Revolution, Chamfort would have been remembered if at all as an elegant fop with an impressive control of language, another literary man on the make, a Julien Sorel who missed the guillotine.

There are times in intellectual history when politics sweeps the boards. During such times politics absorbs, becomes, and is everything. All talent turns to politics, and art, literature, music, family life, and everything else is secondary, if not altogether beside the point; or so at least they seem to those who live during such times. The years leading up to, through, and immediately after the French Revolution were such a time. Chamfort, despite his claims to wish to live outside society, was quite as swept up as any intellectual of his day in the events of the French Revolution. He might, in his aphorisms, mock society as "nothing but the contentions of a thousand clashing petty interests, an eternal conflict of all the vanities that cross each other, strike against each other, are wounded and humiliated by each other," but when the action of the revolution began Chamfort was there, a player very close to its center. Nietzsche, in *The Gay Science*, remarks: "That a man who understood men and the crowd as well as Chamfort, nevertheless joined the crowd and did not stay aside in philosophical renunciation and resistance, I can explain it to myself only in this way: He had one instinct that was even stronger than his wisdom and had never been satisfied—hatred of all nobility by blood."

As late as 1784, Chamfort accepted the post of principal secretary to Mme Elizabeth, the sister of Louis XVI, which didn't stop him from writing, in collaboration with Mirabeau, *Consideration of the Society or Order of Cincinnati*, a Rousseauistic pamphlet making a strong case against nobility. ("He is," said Mirabeau of Chamfort, "the flint I need for my musket.") He had earlier joined a number of younger political intellectuals, known as the Bellechasse group, of whom Talleyrand would go on to become the most famous member. Chamfort wrote one of the first arguments for republican government during the ancien régime. Later, along with Mirabeau and Tallyrand, he joined the Club of Thirty, which prepared the ground for the first democratically run election ever held in France. As Arnaud says, "Chamfort was born too early—or too late —to produce a major literary work, but he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had arrived just at the right time to change the world."

Chamfort's deep antipathy to the nobility is not difficult to trace. It had its beginnings in his own disgraced birth, and came to its maturity with Chamfort himself, who needed the approval of the nobility for any advancement he wished to make. This antipathy to the nobility plays throughout Chamfort's aphorisms. He took what Montaigne said of nobility, "Since we cannot achieve it let us avenge ourselves by speaking ill of it," and remarked that it would be better rewritten as "I detest that nobility which made me avoid what I loved, or could have loved." Behind much of the rancor in the aphorisms lie the sad twists that Chamfort felt he had to undergo in his own personality before those who were above him in rank but, as he well knew, in nothing else. A man without money or a title, he averred, was more estranged than "a Frenchman in Peking or Macao or a Lapp in Senegal." "To acquire fortune and distinction in spite of the disadvantage of having no ancestors, and to do it in the midst of that crowd who received everything at birth, is like winning, or stale-mating a game of chess after giving one's adversary a rook, or castle. . . . One can manage without a castle, but not without the queen."

The French Revolution was thought to give everyone back the queen through beheading the real queen and her husband, Louis XVI. Chamfort exalted in the revolution, at least for a time. His resentment, his Rousseau-like idealism, his quite genuine feeling for the underdog, all got a good workout in the first years of the revolution. "Society is made up of two great classes," Chamfort wrote, in one of his most famous aphorisms, "those who have more dinners than appetite, and those who have more appetite than dinners." Now at last he didn't have to hide the side on which his own true feeling lay. Arnaud reports that "he was a happy revolutionary . . . [hewing] a middle path between intrigue and uprightness, pragmatism and utopia." Where once he claimed a noble ancestry, now he vaunted his lowly upbringing. He stripped away all the luxuries from his personal life. He justified the early days of the Terror. Heads on pikes, the creaking inexorable wheels of the tumbril, the persistent snap of the "national razor" didn't cause him to flinch. "These days you have to be cruel out of humaneness," he said. He was himself asked to be director of the Bibliothèque Nationale. He demurred, but later agreed to accept a co-directorship.

As Chamfort's generation was replaced by the generation of Danton and Robespierre, with Marat overlapping both, the second Terror began in horrendous earnest. Chamfort's own position became precarious under this reign of lawyers turned revolutionists. He was twice arrested, first accused of advocating criminal behavior by a spy who wanted his job at the Bibliothèque Nationale and who claimed to hear him approve of the assassination of Marat by Charlotte Corday, the granddaughter of Corneille; and the second time for putatively refusing to dissociate himself from Charlotte Corday and thus, in the mad logic of the revolution, proving his accuser correct.

Upon this second arrest, Chamfort was sent to the prison known as Madelonnettes, where, Arnaud reports, meat went untouched because it was rumored to have come from the bodies of victims of the guillotine. What wasn't rumor was the filth and stench of this, the beastliest jail in Paris. Chamfort was made to spend two nights in Madelonnettes, among rats real and metaphorical. His brief sojourn in this prison was a jolt to more than his, Chamfort's, metabolism; he, who felt he had sacrificed so much for the revolution, now could not but know that he was likely soon to be sacrificed to it himself. He vowed, come what may, never to return to Madelonnettes.

Revolutions, like many varieties of slug, ingest their own kind, and so eventually did the French Revolution swallow Chamfort, one of its most ardent early provocateurs, ideologues, and supporters. When told that the theater in Paris was being poorly attended, he remarked that "tragedy no longer has the same effect once it roams the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

streets." And so when it was announced to Chamfort, who after his stay at the Madelonnettes was under house arrest, that he would have to return to prison, he quietly finished his simple dinner of soup and coffee, retired to his bedroom, and proceeded hideously to butcher himself.

Arnaud provides the graphic details of Chamfort's attempted suicide. I shall here offer the Parental Guidance version and say that with a mis-aimed pistol shot he first blew out his right eye; he then attempted to cut his throat; and finally he slashed himself about the arms and legs. In all he inflicted twenty-two wounds upon himself without completing the job. He would later claim that Seneca, a richer man, had servants to help him and so was able to make a tidier job of his own suicide. Chamfort would live five or so months longer, but inept treatment of his wounds—in closing them up, the attending physician neglected to leave drainage slits—brought about his death on April 13, 1794. "When a man lies dying, he does not die from his disease alone," wrote Péguy. "He dies from his whole life."

No one would have known about Chamfort's aphorisms but for their having been discovered and saved by his faithful friend Ginguené, who eventually brought them to the public under Chamfort's own ironically intended title of *Products of the Perfected Civilization*. The irony, heavy-handedly bitter, is that Chamfort found civilization, both under the monarchy and under the revolution, as far as possible from perfected. "Prejudice, vanity, scheming," wrote Chamfort, "these are what govern the world," and he goes on to report that "he whose only principles of conduct are reason, truth, and sensibility has nothing in common with society," concluding that "it is within himself that he must seek out and find virtually all his happiness."

Here we have the *donnée* for nearly all aphorists. Ah, if only man had the simple good sense to be content in solitude. Pascal said it first: "All the misfortunes of men derive from one single thing, which is their inability to sit quietly in a room." La Bruyère chimes in with: "In France, it takes much firmness of spirit and a great breadth of understanding to do without offices and positions, and be willing to stay at home and do nothing." Chamfort, too, maintains that "the world hardens most men's hearts," and giving oneself up to several days of society leaves one troubled and sad, and the only advantage of having been out in the world is "the pleasure it lends to retirement." Elsewhere he says that the ability to say "no" and "the ability to live to oneself are the only two ways of preserving one's liberty and one's character." The problem, for Chamfort and for the others, was managing to stay home, out of the tumult, in repose, quietly, thinking.

"That of all days is the most completely wasted in which one did not once laugh," wrote Chamfort. Yet, one's sense is, he was more likely to have been the cause of laughter in others, with his lacerating wit, than in himself, who was often the object of his own witty lacerations. Traditionally, aphorists come on cooly elegant in their disdain, but Chamfort, as Sainte-Beuve remarked, "scorched the paper" on which he wrote. He is almost always the angry aphorist. He claims no wisdom, unlike La Rochefoucauld or La Bruyère or Vauvenargues. They used scalpels; he a broad-axe; they took lessons from life, he remained furious about it; they aimed for the most heightened objectivity, he could never slip his passion; they wrote as if from outside life looking in, he wrote as if fully caught in life's whirlpool. "Living," he wrote, "is an ailment which is relieved every sixteen hours by sleep. Death is the cure."

The history of literature could be written around the subject of writers finding their true forms. Sometimes the forms are there waiting, and sometimes they have almost to be invented. Poulet Although he came to it late in his life, the aphorism was perfect for Chamfort, though he himself never had the time to make more perfect his own aphorisms. W. G. Moore, in *La Rochefoucauld: His Mind and Art*, has recounted the social

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

context in which La Rochefoucauld, who is the father of the form, created his own aphorisms. They began in a game, played among the circle of Mme de Sable, where social observations were set out and then honed to their greatest possible pungency and brevity, in the attempt to turn them into epigrams. La Rochefoucauld's manuscripts show how he would often begin with a full paragraph and then, slowly, thoughtfully, clip and prune and boil a thought down to its quintessence. Final approval in many instances awaited the word of Mme de Sable. In this purifying process, where economy was so highly valued, abstraction naturally emerged prominent. Who knows out of how much in the way of discussion, writing, and editing La Rochefoucauld's "The head is always fooled by the heart" was born?

None of this is meant to imply that La Rochefoucauld's elegant, economical aphorisms were made by method alone. They were made, above all, by experience. La Rochefoucauld lived in what the Chinese, in their famous curse, called "interesting times"—that is, a time in which men had plenty of latitude to show their more disgraceful side—in those civil wars in France during the minority of Louis XIV known as the Fronde; and he lived long enough to have been disappointed by life, which used perhaps to take a bit longer than it does now. Chamfort, too, lived in "interesting times"; he also lived long enough to be disappointed in love and by ambition. Add to this the rancor that, as a bastard, was part of his birthright and you have the classical profile of the natural aphorist.

Georges Poulet has written that Chamfort is only of interest from the time that he began to write his aphorisms. "Before that there had undoubtedly been other versions of Chamfort: an ambitious hack, a dandy, a passionate lover." All of these, of course, were grist for the mill, which ground exceedingly fine, of the aphorist. "Love," wrote Chamfort, "has not permitted its secret to be revealed; man knows it only on the condition of not being able to divulge it, and he loses the memory of it the moment his passion ceases, for that secret is nothing other than love itself." As Poulet rightly notes, the man Chamfort constantly executes in his aphorisms "is indeed Chamfort himself." The bitter lessons learned by that unhappy young man went into the stiletto-like sentences of the mature writer. "A philosopher," he wrote, "must start by experiencing the happiness of the dead."

A good part of what impresses the modern reader with Chamfort is not only his essential loneliness but his own lucid sense of how precisely alone in the world he was. "Preserve, if you can, the interests that attach you to society, but cultivate the feelings that separate you from it," he wrote. Yet the feelings that separated Chamfort from society, from his fellow man, from nearly everyone, seemed to come naturally enough to him. He is one of those loners in literature, in the line of Baudelaire, Dostoevsky, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Camus. The reason each of these writers was essentially alone is that each was intent on discovering an ethic that would comport with the prominent fact of evil in man and in nature, each was contemptuous of intellectual mediocrity and philosophical sham, and each permitted no easy optimism or belief in the rehabilitation of man through progress in history. "What is a philosopher?" asked Chamfort. "He is a man who opposes Nature to Law, reason to custom, his conscience to public opinion, and his judgment to error."

Chamfort was a moralist who distrusted even his fellow moralists. The argument has been made that even the relatively rough form of some of Chamfort's aphorisms is based on the almost systematic hatred in Chamfort of systematic thinking. Professor Eve Katz has written that Chamfort's aphorisms "do not, like La Rochefoucauld's, for example, rest on the assumption that one can enclose an entire philosophy in one or two sentences. They do not lay claim to certainty. They do not presuppose that there are limits to ideas and that one can give them definitive expression." She quotes, in sup-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

port of her argument, another of Chamfort's aphorisms:

> In order to view things correctly, one must give words the opposite sense to the one the world gives them. Misanthrope, for instance, means philanthrope; bad Frenchman means good citizen, which implies certain monstrous abuses; philosopher means "a simple man, who knows that two and two make four, etc."

Perhaps the best way—which is also to say, the best reason—to read Chamfort today is for his honesty. For honesty, if it cuts deeply enough, is itself a variant of truth, and discrete touches of penetrating honesty may have to do until a more elaborate or systematic version of truth is available to those us of an even mildly skeptical nature. The Chamfort who gives pleasure of a lighter kind is the Chamfort who wrote

> It is commonly believed that the art of pleasing is a great means of achieving wealth; knowing how to be bored is an art which succeeds still better. The talent for acquiring wealth, like the one for succeeding with women, can be reduced practically to that.

It is the Chamfort of the quick and deadly definition—"Love: agreeable folly," "Ambition: serious imbecility," or "Celebrity: the advantage of being known by those who do not know you"—whom one finds so companionable, however oddly the word "companionable" may seem to fit this all but friendless writer. Yet it was Chamfort who remarked that "in certain friendships one enjoys the happiness of the passions and the approbation of reason as well," which constitutes a quite respectable blurb for the intellectual profit his own writing brings.

In his aphorisms, Chamfort is a writer dedicated to acting with honesty, living with limitations, and striving always for truth. "Enjoy and give pleasure, without doing harm to yourself or to anyone else—that, I think, is the whole of morality," he wrote. His own was a life far from filled with enjoyment, and in the end he did the ultimate harm to himself, yet today, roughly two hundred years after he wrote it, Chamfort's encapsulated prescription for morality rings true, and the ring of truth is the only serious criterion for judging an aphorism. Coming from the man who wrote that "pleasure may be based on illusion, but happiness rests on truth," this is in itself a small but impressive and, yes, finally happy tribute to Chamfort the aphorist, the artist of truth.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A footnote for Housman

by Brad Leithauser

One of the most fascinating, and frustrating, footnotes I've ever come across—to my mind, one of the most beguiling footnotes in English literature—is found in A. E. Housman's "The Name and Nature of Poetry," a lecture he delivered at Cambridge in 1933. As its title suggests, the lecture was speculative and broad-ranging, and hence was a departure for Housman, who repeatedly called himself "no literary critic" and who usually restricted his lectures to tightly focused examinations of classical texts, about which he spoke, according to one of his students, in a "level, impassive voice . . . without enthusiasm but with an athletic spareness." By temperament a surpassingly wary and punctilious man, Housman had profound reservations about presenting to the public anything that might resemble breezy, insupportable generalizations, and the composing of his lecture caused him, as his biographies attest, no end of inner trouble and turmoil.

Before unfolding his central thesis (the notion that poetry "is not the thing said but a way of saying it," that it "is more physical than intellectual"), Housman informed his audience that his immediate impulse had been to select another topic entirely, that of The Artifice of Versification. This is a subject, he assured his listeners, that belongs to the methodical mind—to "the man of science," in fact, who would be "fitter for the task than most men of letters." He went on: "This latent base, comprising natural laws by which all versification is conditioned, and the secret springs of the pleasure which good versification can give, is little explored by critics: a few pages of Coventry Patmore and a few of Frederic Myers contain all, so far as I know, or all of value, which has been written on such matters." He then enumerated, in his memorable footnote, the sorts of issues he might have undertaken:

> I mean such matters as these: the existence in some metres, not in others, of an inherent alternation of stresses, stronger and weaker; the presence in verse of silent and invisible feet, like rests in music; the reason why some lines of different length will combine harmoniously while others can only be so combined by great skill or good luck; why, while blank verse can be written in lines of ten or six syllables, a series of octosyllables ceases to be verse if they are not rhymed; how Coleridge, in applying the new principle which he announced in the preface to *Christabel*, has fallen between two stools; the necessary limit to inversion of stress, which Milton understood and Bridges overstepped; why, of two pairs of rhymes, equally correct and both consisting of the same vowels and consonants, one is richer to the mental ear and the other poorer; the office of alliteration in verse, and how its definition must be narrowed if it is to be something which can perform that office and not fail of its effect or actually defeat its purpose.

Well, it's an endlessly thought-provoking list. Some of his conclusions look dubious (if

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

we accept that Bridges metrically "oversteps," what in the world are we to make of Hopkins?) and others (like his doubts about unrhymed octosyllabics) seem shrewd but are left maddeningly unexplained. What a shame it is that Housman, with his fierce industry and methodical scholarship, never addressed such questions! The unfortunate fact is that prosodic analysis of the sort he was advocating has not advanced far since the days when he declared himself ready to throw out all but "a few pages." Why is this? Surely it is odd that in a century of exceptional criticism by practicing poets—Eliot, Auden, Jarrell, Bogan, Lowell, Winters, et al.—so little energy has been given to a systematic expounding of The Artifice of Versification. Perhaps, had Housman followed up his initial impulses and provided us with a maker's guide to verse-writing, other poets of equal or even greater eminence would have been tempted to extend or contend with him. Housman might have left us an essay that would have not only illuminated the underpinnings of his own verse but also generated a rich, independent field of study.

Whatever questions or quibbles we might raise about the conclusions encapsulated in the footnote, we sense in it unmistakably the simultaneous firmness and subtlety of Housman's approach toward prosody. He had fervent feelings about what ought to be essayed and what "wasn't done." In his own verse, for example, lines concluding with an unstressed syllable—feminine endings—could be left unrhymed; masculine endings generally *demanded* a rhyme (there are only something like half a dozen unrhymed masculine lines in his entire oeuvre). And he held to these attitudes throughout his artistic career; prosodically, no less than thematically, his verse stayed constant. The poems of his second book, the mistitled *Last Poems*, which appeared in 1922 (fourteen years before the posthumous *More Poems*), are stylistically all but identical to those of his first book, *A Shropshire Lad*, which had appeared in 1896.

This constancy—sometimes referred to as a "failure to develop"—may be less of a drawback than it would first appear. Admittedly, those artists who never change forfeit a particularly intense form of excitement—the reader's pleasure in tracing the pathway of an unexpected evolution—but they sometimes offer, as Housman does, a compensatory sharpening of minute pleasures. In an atmosphere of fixity, one naturally notices smaller, finer details than in the creations of a constantly metamorphosing artist. Consider, for instance, a passage from *Last Poems*:

> For nature, heartless, witless nature,
> Will neither care nor know
> What stranger's feet may find the meadow
> And trespass there and go,
> Nor ask amid the dews of morning
> If they are mine or no.

These lines, with their "light rhyme" of know/meadow/go, represent an extremely unusual effect in Housman, who typically insisted that his end-rhymes be "clean," that end-words either clearly rhyme or clearly not rhyme. He rarely allowed himself a simple off-rhyme, let alone anything more exotic. In the case of another poet, a reader might race right past a stray echo of this sort; with Housman, one is pulled up short. He allows himself so little of this particular variety of clangor that each instance speaks with an amplified resonance.

Is there another English-language poet so foursquare in his constructions? His favored meter was the iambic tetrameter, and there are strikingly few run-overs; line after line stands on its own as a syntactical or sense unit. His favored stanza was the quatrain, and again there are strikingly few run-overs; stanza after stanza concludes not with a colon or semicolon (still less with a comma or dash) but with a period. Everywhere one looks, even in those lyrics set in other meters and stanzaic patterns, the impression is of solidity, symmetry, precision, control.

Our literature comprises notably few poems of merit composed in unvarying meters. Even in those poets, like Pope or Dryden, known for their conservative metrics, minor deviations—a trochee, a rough

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

elision, a trisyllabic substitution—are forever turning up; most formal poets never come close to writing any wholly regular poem. The conventional wisdom, of course, is that such uniformity is stultifying—a view implicit in Pope's attack on those who "equal syllables alone require." Nonetheless, Housman (like Frost, whose "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" proceeds with the unswerving clack of a metronome) frequently composed poems that are all but regular, and occasionally got by without even the slightest of metrical variations, as in "XXVI" from *A Shropshire Lad*:

Along the field as we came by
A year ago, my love and I,
The aspen over stile and stone
Was talking to itself alone.
'Oh who are these that kiss and pass?
A country lover and his lass;
Two lovers looking to be wed;
And time shall put them both to bed,
But she shall lie with earth above,
And he beside another love.'

And sure enough beneath the tree
There walks another love with me,
And overhead the aspen heaves
Its rainy-sounding silver leaves;
And I spell nothing in their stir,
But now perhaps they speak to her,
And plain for her to understand
They talk about a time at hand
When I shall sleep with clover clad,
And she beside another lad.

In forgoing most forms of prosodic surprise, Housman placed a sizable burden on himself: he ensured that his poetry would be more than usually dependent on rescues or releases in the guise of a thematic "twist." These tend to fall, by my lights, into three camps. The twist sometimes takes the form of a paradox, often of an amusing sort, as in a perfect joy like "XVIII" from *A Shropshire Lad*:

Oh, when I was in love with you,
Then I was clean and brave,
And miles around the wonder grew
How well did I behave.

And now the fancy passes by,
And nothing will remain,
And miles around they'll say that I
Am quite myself again.

The poem depends utterly on a small joke: when someone is "himself again" it's usually a cause for rejoicing rather than, as here, lamentation. But the jest, as with so much of Housman's bitter humor, carries a walloping poignancy. Into the space of two quatrains he has condensed a tale not merely of heartbreak but of the loss of personal salvation.

In many poems, as Christopher Ricks points out in the introduction to his hugely welcome new anthology of Housman, *Collected Poems and Selected Prose*,[1] much of the energy derives from blasphemy. When not doubting His very existence, Housman is continually questioning God's fairness or adequacy. The heat in such verses is generated by the friction between the genteel versification and the bleak message. When, by contrast, Gerard Manley Hopkins challenges God, he wrenches his forms—often the sonnet—into overloaded lines and turbulent distensions; Housman does the same without dislodging a single iamb.

Finally, and again in potent contrast to the poetry's polished surfaces, the twist may take the form of the horrible or grotesque. Housman's verse abounds in revelations of quiet grisliness (murders, hangings, suicides, moldering flesh, mutilations) often linked to amorous designs:

'Oh lad, what is it, lad, that drips
Wet from your neck on mine?
What is it falling on my lips,
My lad, that tastes of brine?'

'Oh like enough 'tis blood, my dear,
For when the knife has slit

1 *A. E. Housman: Collected Poems and Selected Prose*, edited, with an introduction, by Christopher Ricks; Penguin Books (London), 528 pages, £7.99 paper.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The throat across from ear to ear
'Twill bleed because of it.'

Desire is never far from pain and retribution in Housman's world.

Some of the admirable ways in which he combines the predictable and the surprising are on display in "XIII" from *A Shropshire Lad*:

When I was one-and-twenty
I heard a wise man say,
'Give crowns and pounds and guineas
But not your heart away;
Give pearls away and rubies
But keep you fancy free.'
But I was one-and-twenty,
No use to talk to me.

When I was one-and-twenty
I heard him say again,
'The heart out of the bosom
Was never given in vain;
'Tis paid with sighs aplenty
And sold for endless rue.'
And I am two-and-twenty,
And oh, 'tis true, 'tis true.

The twist here, a wry and heart-sore joke, lies in the poem's disproportions. The wise man is granted most of the space and eloquence—but the young lover still manages to say all that need be said. The first six lines of the poem are given over to the wise man, who speaks elegantly and persuasively. But in the stanza's final two lines he is, in effect, confounded utterly. What use is advice, however apt and sagacious, in the face of youthful ardor? The second stanza mirrors the first almost exactly (even down to minor matters of punctuation), but with a sharp increase in intensity: the wise man's warning is more explicit and detailed, the young man's confession of heedlessness more fervent and anguished.

This intensification is marked prosodically: the second stanza contains the one moment when the meter falters, when the iambics give way. The reader comes to "The heart out of the bosom . . ." and is pulled off kilter. Inertial propulsion—the steady singsonging of the previous lines—encourages us to trample on ordinary speech rhythms and to read it as "the *heart* out *of* the *bo*som . . ." Meter tugs us one way, idiom another. This momentary difficulty arises, happily, at an ideal juncture: the lyric shudders just at that tremulous, hazardous instant when one person's feelings go out to another. A reader need only attempt to "correct" the meter ("The heart from out the bosom . . ." or "The feelings from the bosom . . .") in order to see how Housman, a master craftsman, accomplishes very much with very little. Correct the meter, and half the poem's energy spills away.

Housman's own heart was "given" in his early twenties, when he fell in love with a fellow student at Oxford, Moses Jackson. Housman was extremely reticent about his homosexuality, never broaching the matter even to his brother Laurence, who was—considering the era—boldly undisguised about his own homosexual life. All the evidence suggests, however, that Jackson was the one consuming passion of Housman's romantic life; as an elderly man, he once remarked, of the possibility of falling in love more than once, "anyone who considered that he had done so had simply never really loved at all." The evidence also suggests that Housman's passion for Jackson went not only unconsummated but unrequited. (One might propose—somewhat unchivalrously, perhaps, in the light of that stirring declaration of one-in-a-lifetime love—that Housman's affections were so durable because unrealized; Keats could have told him something about the superiority of unheard melodies and unkissed lovers.)

For all his reticence, Housman's unhappiness at love is written all over his poems. Passion in his verse is a source of guilt, anger toward fate, anger toward the unresponsive loved one, bitterness, resigned sadness, and violence—pretty much everything except pleasure. Auden, who wrote with deep sympathy and trenchancy about

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Housman, proposed that his anguish lay not in his homosexuality *per se* but in the particular form of his impulses:

> If Housman did feel shame and guilt, this was caused not by the Bible but by classical literature. I am pretty sure that in his sexual tastes he was an anal passive. Ancient Greece and Rome were both pederastic cultures in which the adult passive homosexual was regarded as comic and contemptible.

Auden does not say whether he draws this conclusion from Housman's poems, his essays, his letters, or from hearsay. In any case, this is not an interpretation found, so far as I know, in any of Housman's biographies, most of which have suggested that, given prevailing attitudes in Victorian England, his homosexuality was itself a sufficient cause of severe distress. (That "If . . ." of Auden's looks faintly disingenuous. Even without the indications we have that Housman was tormented by the Wilde persecution, the poems themselves are suffused in "shame and guilt.")

Whatever forms Housman's desires may have taken (a recent biographer turned up ambiguous notations in Housman's hand suggesting that in middle age he may have engaged male prostitutes during vacations to Paris), his homosexuality seems to lie at the core of the confederacy that his poems create among the victimized and the damned. His soul's compatriots are, over and over again, the condemned criminal, the insomniac, the doomed soldier, and those who sleep forever alone under the earth. (There are an extraordinary number of beds in Housman's poems, but few joyful ones.) His poems repeatedly play upon the realization—cold comfort!—that a person in solitary misery belongs to a brotherhood of those who likewise have felt alone and miserable. However confined he may have been in his daily personal dealings, his imagination—no doubt enlarged by his classical studies—commanded a strikingly open and fluid view of the sweep of time. He seems to have felt himself, with special keenness, a brother to the doomed of every era, including those who were not yet born, as exemplified in his epigraph to *More Poems*:

> They say my verse is sad: no wonder;
> Its narrow measure spans
> Tears of eternity, and sorrow,
> Not mine, but man's.
>
> This is for all ill-treated fellows
> Unborn and unbegot,
> For them to read when they're in trouble
> And I am not.

Housman in his verses often appears to be speaking man to man—or, more accurately, lad to lad. His particular focus on youth was noted by Auden in his concluding words on Housman: "I don't know how it is with the young today, but to my generation no other English poet seemed so perfectly to express the sensibility of a male adolescent. If I do not now turn to him very often, I am eternally grateful to him for the joy he gave me in my youth." Housman's hold on the young male mind is analogous, perhaps, to that which Sylvia Plath exerts over young women (or so it appears in my position as a lecturer at a women's college). Theirs is an ability to engender in the young reader the sensation that *These poems were written for me.* The male-to-male tenor in Housman's poems need not exclude women, of course; according to a young woman poet of my acquaintance, it may provide part of their charm. She tells me there's "something bracing in this feeling of eavesdropping on a conversation directed elsewhere." Still, in the long run it may be difficult to engage oneself fully in an overheard conversation.

Housman's attempt through poetry to pass along to young men a cold but thrilling joy—that which is provided by surpassingly bleak and surpassingly beautiful verses—might well be seen, in the life of an artist whose work was centered in unrequitedness, as a substitute for sexual activity. He is saying to his "lads," in effect, *I'll give you what I can.* And it's a deeply

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cheering irony that what this poet who was forever singing about death had to give remains immortal and undiminished.

Still, the unrelieved gloominess of Housman's outlook at times cries out for parody. Even his admirers can hardly muster indignation at some of the lampooning he inspired, like Pound's "Mr Housman's Message":

> The bird sits on the hawthorn tree
> But he dies also, presently.
> Some lads get hung, and some get shot.
> Woeful is the human lot.

Surely, any poet who would conclude his most famous book with "When I am dead and gone" (the final line of *A Shropshire Lad*) is asking for trouble.

Last lines were a problem for Housman. Probably nowhere else is the narrowness of his subject matter, and his treatment of it, so damningly apparent. One poem ends so much like another that they sometimes run together in the mind. You would have to be more than a Housman devotee—would have to be a Housman fanatic—to identify which of these last lines go with which poems:

> But you will die to-day.
>
> And there they died for me.
>
> And died because they were.
>
> And all you folk will die.
>
> Before I die for ever.
>
> To lay me down and die.
>
> And I lie down alone.
>
> Lie you must, and not with me.
>
> And there lie they.
>
> And 'twill not dream of me.
>
> To-night to lie in the rain.
>
> And cannot come again.
>
> 'No, my lad, I cannot come.'
>
> And wilt cast forth no more.
>
> Sleep away, lad; wake no more.
>
> Sleep on, sleep sound.
>
> Lays lads underground.
>
> There's nothing but the night.
>
> But this will last for long.
>
> Whence he never shall arise.

Some poets provide their critics with ready-made and seemingly unavoidable duties. Those who take up Wordsworth, for instance, usually feel a need to "explode the myth" of his decline (patent though that decline may have been); Pound's explicators often feel compelled to defend him from charges of fascism and anti-Semitism (indefensible though his attitudes were); and so forth. In the case of Housman, the obvious task is to unify the "two Housmans"—the reserved classical scholar and the open-hearted lyric poet. On the face of it, he seems to have done a remarkably thorough job of bifurcating his existence.

Actually, this may be a case of one more myth that is in no pressing need of being exploded. On the whole, I'd agree with John Berryman's assessment that it's "incredible" that the poems and the criticism were written by the same man. For those readers whose primary interest is the poetry, rather than the classical scholarship or the life, it seems clear that Housman was sufficiently "divided" as to be able to shut down utterly his critical side when he was creating. How else account for the abysmal depths to which his verses could occasionally plummet? He was capable of composing lines that Housman the feared and formidable critic might naturally have ripped into with feral glee. Imagine what the critic might

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

have done with a couplet like this:

> And brooding on my heavy ill,
> I met a statue standing still.

or a quatrain like this:

> Then, 'twas before my time, the Roman
> At yonder heaving hill would stare:
> The blood that warms an English yeoman,
> The thoughts that hurt him, they were there.

or opening stanzas like this one:

> Once in the wind of morning
> I ranged the thymy wold;
> The world-wide air was azure
> And all the brooks ran gold.

or this one:

> When I meet the morning beam
> Or lay me down at night to dream,
> I hear my bones within me say,
> 'Another night, another day.'

In truth, Housman's verse could be atrocious in all sorts of ways; it might even be argued that the bad poet was a more varied artist than the superb one. His old-fashioned phrasings and archaisms can seem not so much quaint and charming as stilted and lifeless. It's a little hard to believe that any serious poet was using "lief as rather" and "hark, the belfried tingle" and "we both must hie" (phrases which Wordsworth or Coleridge, a hundred years earlier, would probably have deemed insupportably quaint) a decade after Eliot's "Prufrock." His poems abound in sentimental turnings —"rose-lipt maidens," "leaping lads," girls who "go maying," souls that "linger sighing," and so forth. Cyril Connolly, one of Housman's harshest and most compelling critics, actually went to the trouble of tallying how often "lad" ("one of the most vapid [words] in the language," according to Connolly) appears in *Shropshire Lad*. The answer is sixty-seven times in sixty-three poems—a statistic that must send a shudder up the spine of even Housman's staunchest admirers. But to my mind, a still more damning show of sentimentality arises in Housman's self-congratulatory toughness. Is there in all the world a more cloying form of sentimentality than the conviction that, while peering at life with dead-eye accuracy, one has cast off the solace of sentiment?

Other shortcomings are much less showy. At times Housman is simply bland. When the twist in one of his poems fails to come off, he can wind up expressing conventional thoughts in conventional meters. Much of his later work falls short in just this way.

Curiously—redeemingly—there's often a charm even to his blandness. We must be grateful to any poet of Housman's plentiful talents who seeks to move us with the most infinitesimal and refined modulations. He calls on us at all times to listen closely, lest we lose him utterly. Few poets have such power to induce us to attend so raptly to the music of their verse. And for Housman music is—as "The Name and Nature of Poetry" tells us—the heart of the matter.

However great our regret that Housman never got around to The Artifice of Versification, the lecture he chose to deliver in its place is a valuable and tonic document. It asks us to reappraise our approach to verse and challenges the character of poetry criticism in our time. If its emphasis on the need to stop "maltreating and corrupting language" gives it an old-fashioned feel, it nonetheless raises vexatious, important doubts that have not been answered so much as ignored.

The study of poetry today—which belongs less and less to general-interest magazines and the amateur reader, more and more to specialized journals and the university classroom—is so overwhelmingly a matter of content that its musical components are almost lost altogether. Book after book of what is ostensibly poetry criticism arrives in which the reader has almost no sense that what is under examination is something

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

other than prose—that it is *verse*, and hence a matter of meter, rhythm, rhymes, enjambments, and so forth. Time and again poets are converted into proto-philosophers, upon whose murky pronouncements the critic labors to liberate what the poet was "really saying" or (worse, still) "trying to say." This is a mode of criticism that hardly knows what to do with Housman's pellucid, crux-free lines. Poor Housman, it turns out, has little to offer except beauty and pleasure. In his finicky exactitude, he didn't even have the grace to leave behind uncertainties of punctuation!

There is an irony in Housman's being inhospitable to the critics, for literary scholarship was the defining professional passion of his life. One can imagine his never having attempted to write poems (or, more likely, his having begun a few and then, with typical rigor, deeming himself inadequate), but one cannot quite envision for him anything but a scholar's life. All the more interesting, then, is one's suspicion that he would have reacted with scorn to so much contemporary scholarship, with its emphasis on intellectual content and the author's private life. (He once wrote: "Even when poetry has a meaning, as it usually has, it may be inadvisable to draw it out.") Anyone who attempts to write Housman's biography—and there have been something like half a dozen studies—must proceed under a dark certainty that the result would probably leave Housman seething in his grave.

Actually, readers who focus not upon his life but his verses may be doing not only Housman but themselves a favor. As a man, Housman had a good many charms—he was witty and loyal and appreciative. But he was at times such a thoroughly rebarbative man—so laced with snobberies, cruelties, condescensions, rancors—that a prolonged exposure to his personality can temporarily pollute the well of his verses. There are moments in his biographies when the only thing that keeps him from being totally unlikable is that he appears so completely miserable.

Fortunately, one's impatience or dislike dissipates quickly in the presence of his best verses. They act on the reader quickly, for one of their greatest appeals is their distilled concentration. How many poets, major or minor, have written so many little gems, most of them shorter than a sonnet?

My own list of favorite Housman poems consists of twelve lyrics, of which the longest runs only sixteen lines. One of them, "XXXVI" from *More Poems*, is a mere quatrain. On the first couple of readings, I thought it lovely, but I now feel it's something better than lovely:

> Here dead lie we because we did not choose
> To live and shame the land from which we sprung.
> Life, to be sure, is nothing much to lose;
> But young men think it is, and we were young.

Many familiar Housman images and themes are here—dead soldiers, the futility of heroism, and a dark suspicion that courage and cowardice, virtue and vice, are almost the same, since life doesn't matter anyway. *Almost* the same . . . The beautiful and young and foolish naturally think otherwise, and again Housman would give the beautiful young fools the final word. *They* think that in dying young they have suffered a tragedy—have lost everything—and in the end he isn't about to contradict them.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ad Reinhardt at MOMA

by Karen Wilkin

I should say right at the beginning that I was less than enraptured by the prospect of a major Ad Reinhardt show, even by the prospect of the first retrospective of his work to be organized by an important American museum.[1] Reinhardt is one of those painters I've never been passionate about. I've always taken him seriously, but more or less for granted. I'd run into him as a personality in the course of working on a variety of Stuart Davis projects, which probably contributed as much to my impression of Reinhardt as my experience of his work. I knew that Davis befriended Reinhardt in the 1930s and became a kind of mentor to the younger artist, almost a full generation his junior. I knew that Reinhardt shared Davis's idiosyncratic but engaged approach to leftist politics and his intolerance of orthodoxy, cant, and pretentiousness. They appeared to share, too, a fondness for the intensely serious wisecrack, an unshakable belief in modernism, and a taste for deep thinking and exhaustive writing about art. Reinhardt's wicked sense of humor was familiar to me, mostly from those hilarious art-historical cartoons that neatly ranked almost the entire American population of painters and sculptors according to their degree of commitment to abstraction. Reinhardt's cranky, incisive "serious" writings confirmed his own uncompromising adherence to abstraction and his rejection of all matters that he deemed extraneous to art.

His paintings were familiar, of course—deadpan, rather anonymous monochromes that seemed to embody the "what you see is what you get" notion propounded by the young Frank Stella years before Stella declared himself. But when I thought about what I had seen of Reinhardt's work, I realized that it was—compared to what I had seen of his contemporaries'—surprisingly little. I retained only a vague impression of the shows I had seen at Betty Parsons Gallery when I was a student, and I had missed the famous 1965 exhibition of the blue, red, and black paintings, divided between Graham, Parsons, and Stable galleries (I was doing graduate work in Rome at the time). The most recent exhibition that showed Reinhardt in any depth must have been the skewed, revisionist view of Abstract Expressionism promulgated by the Albright-Knox Gallery, in Buffalo, in 1987, which had been less than enlightening. It seemed that my experience of Reinhardt's paintings was limited to relatively few pictures and those, as far as I could recall, were almost all of a sleekness and a chilling geometric austerity that had never really engaged me. All of which is a roundabout way of saying that I

1 "Ad Reinhardt" was on view at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, from June 1 through September 2, 1991, and will travel to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (October 13, 1991-January 5, 1992). A catalogue, with a preface by William Rubin and an essay, "The Limit of Almost," by Yve-Alain Bois, has been published by Rizzoli (144 pages, $45; $29.95 paper).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

went to the Reinhardt retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art with modest—I almost said "minimal"—expectations. The show both confirmed and exploded my preconceptions.

Organized by William Rubin, director emeritus of MOMA's Department of Painting and Sculpture, and Richard Koshalek, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, the show was a model of thoughtful selection and elegant presentation. Reinhardt was treated with the greatest possible seriousness and respect and his work probably looked better in MOMA's sparse, intelligent installation than ever before. There was even a dimly lit "decompression zone" at the end, to make the transition between Reinhardt's rarefied world and the randomness of actuality less harsh. (The sense of care and amplitude inherent in the installation also raised, once again, disturbing questions about the way both Morris Louis's and Helen Frankenthaler's work had been jammed into that same space during their retrospective exhibitions a few years ago.)

The show's introductory section included a few blowups of those celebrated, scathing cartoons, bitingly funny attacks on artists, dealers, critics, curators, and collectors alike. They helped give a sense of Reinhardt as a witty, articulate nose-thumber, a personality who thrived on outrageousness, who—as was once said of one of Freud's more unruly disciples—didn't suffer fools gladly, but didn't suffer non-fools all that gladly, either.

The earliest works in the show bore out this impression of irreverence and incisiveness—and reminded me that I'd seen a few of them in the 1983 survey "Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America: 1927-44" organized by the Carnegie Institute. Reinhardt apparently sprang full-grown from the forehead of abstraction and was proud that, unlike most of his colleagues, he had never been anything but an abstract painter. In later years, he assumed a kind of moral superiority because of this and even attached an extraordinary burden of high-mindedness to abstraction itself; at a lecture delivered in 1954, for example, he declared: "The principal idea in abstract art has been its morality: other styles were compromises. One of the essential meanings of abstraction is that morality is expressed in the refusal of an artist to do any number of things that he thinks are immoral." But Reinhardt's early works are often playful, or lyrical, or rambunctious. They are ambitious, but more relaxed than the extraordinarily rigorous paintings that are most closely associated with him. (They suggest additional readings of the later work, but more of that later.)

In 1937, the twenty-four-year-old novice painter was accepted as a member of the newly formed American Abstract Artists group, an institution devoted to right-thinking, geometric, non-referential art—"non-objective art," in the terminology of the day. The AAA was so single-minded in its support of non-objective purity that Mondrian accepted an invitation to join them when he came to New York in 1940. Bear in mind that he had broken off contact with De Stijl in 1925, after Theo van Doesburg began using diagonal lines in his paintings, and you get some idea of the level of dedication at the AAA. But Reinhardt's collages and paintings of the late Thirties are surprisingly loose-jointed and spirited. They suggest the iconoclast in the young painter and, too, the influence of his friend, neighbor, and role model, Stuart Davis, who had serious reservations about the AAA and even about Mondrian. Davis believed that their insistence on the right angle and on ideal, geometric shapes was, ultimately, stultifying, likely to deprive art of its energy and immediacy. He attached great importance to the irregularity and the unexpectedness of actuality, and always insisted that his own art, for all its simplification and clarity, was not abstract but firmly rooted in everyday experience. Davis's example haunts much of Reinhardt's earliest work, with its brash color and crisp, jostling shapes.

In his work of the 1940s—assuming the MOMA show has settled some of the persistent problems of Reinhardt's chronology—even the casual geometry of the previous

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

decade seemed more relaxed. Paintings of this period are like flattened, unravelled Cubist images. Planes don't overlap and fluctuate as much as they separate and float side by side, as if Reinhardt were already reluctant to permit even Cubism's slight hint of spatial illusion, or the least deviation from literalness. By the late 1940s, drawing and plane had begun to separate into all but independent elements, in confrontational vertical canvases whose "images" seem tenuously and only temporarily held together. A series of near monochrome, black and white paintings of about 1949 was among the strongest of the early works. Mondrian's *Plus-Minus* drawings were in there somewhere, along with Pollock and possibly de Kooning—those stunning black paintings of the late Forties—but they also seemed personal and ambitious. The polychrome versions of these canvases were less successful; Reinhardt's soft colors diffused the black-and-white pictures' tension between elusive drawing and all-over tonal expanse, so that they read as simultaneously weak and overloaded.

By about 1950, Reinhardt was beginning to look like Reinhardt, albeit with an overt sensuality of color and zingy optical pulse to the paintings that seemed to hark back to Davis's influence more than it pointed to his own later work. But already, he constructed his paintings with clear, overlapping blocks, like over-sized, formalized brushstrokes. I kept thinking about Bradley Walker Tomlin, and the densely packed, chunky *Imaginary Landscapes* by Adolph Gottlieb that had impressed Tomlin so deeply. Reinhardt's pictures of this type have a curious double life. They are about expansion, spread, and all-overness at the same time that they seem extremely formal, clean, and controlled. The larger paintings are the best—there's too much incident for smaller scale—but there's a strange unease, a lack of congruence between the zappy color rhythms, the all-over expanse, and the controlled strokes. The act of putting on paint, of choosing colors, seems codified in these pictures. They're like Albers painting a Pollock.

By the early 1950s, Reinhardt's color had become so intense and so close-valued that the pictures risked being imperceptible. It's hard to be certain that you are actually *seeing* one of these pulsing canvases, with its syncopated dance of smoothly painted, uninflected blocks and bars. Neither their nuances of shape nor of color are apparent unless you spend enough time for the eye to adjust physically to ineffable differences and, even then, it's difficult to be sure of what is really there and what is only an after-image induced by the "real" color blocks. Pictures of this type seem popular with viewers, since they reward time spent looking with rather flashy effects. I'm not convinced they are particularly good or resonant paintings, however, but sophisticated visual games.

The culmination of these efforts, of course, was Reinhardt's best known, most challenging work, the three cycles of paintings with color restricted to red, blue, or black. The red and blue series engaged him during the early Fifties, but he began to find even these severe monochromes too lush: "At that time it didn't seem to make much difference whether I was making a blue picture or a red picture; they were close in value and they were built on a kind of geometry, not on some idea of composition. I had to abandon the color because some people preferred one to the other, which had nothing to do with the painting." Black replaced even the most restricted color in Reinhardt's next—and last—series, the inwardly focused paintings that occupied him from the early 1950s until his unexpected death, at fifty-four, in 1967.

The installation at MOMA echoes Reinhardt's own segregation of these paintings according to color, by installing works of a single hue in each of three spaces, just as the artist had in his three-gallery New York show in 1965. The effect, at MOMA, was surprisingly impressive. The paintings were demanding, authoritative; they insisted that we pay attention, that we keep looking until we could *see*. When you did invest enough time, startling differences became apparent, overwhelming the obvious likenesses of color

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and structure. For all their similarities of conception and composition, the red paintings began to seem positively graphic, compared to the more held-back blues, while variations in the size and proportion of the red and blue pictures and the early black ones —those painted before Reinhardt settled on a five-foot square as his standard format —seemed slightly capricious, compared to the relentlessness repetition of the black squares. (The exhibition's catalogue essays make much of the temporal demands of Reinhardt's paintings, as if such slow revelation over time were unique to them; it's certainly an important aspect of how we perceive Reinhardt's work, but it is simply a function of close-valued color, and a factor in the perception of late Monet, Olitski from the late 1960s on, and many others.)

The tension between Reinhardt's symmetrical, deadpan compositions, their floating rectangles obviously deduced from a grid generated by the proportions of the canvas, and his glowing, subtle color—for all its deliberate limitations—was surprisingly compelling. The installation reinforced the symmetry and elegance of the paintings, turning each group of like-colored canvases into an environment. (I remember a similar installation at MOMA of Rothko's paintings—was it in the early Sixties?—that had a similar impact.) Interestingly, what might have been construed as an essentially decorative approach to Reinhardt had the effect of making the pictures more convincing, since we were obliged to focus even more intently on each work to determine its individuality.

Many Reinhardts turned out to be more interesting than one or two at a time. (I was surprised by this, because painters who work in readily identifiable series often suffer when their work is seen in substantial quantities.) Reinhardt gains, because his obsessiveness and quirkiness, his insistence on pursuing a particular series of permutations—in short, his individuality—becomes more apparent when you are confronted by a large number of his works; single paintings tend to declare themselves chiefly in relation to other stripped-down, geometric, mechanically painted works. Reinhardt, I suspect, would have been exasperated that it took me this long to figure out what must have been, to him, obvious. In that 1954 lecture, he said: "The problem of originality and individuality is complicated. I would advocate a program of uniformity and even monotony to get rid of individuality and interest. I think if everyone does the same things or if one artist does the same thing over and over and again they become more individual."

Is that what Reinhardt was after in those perplexing, perversely difficult black paintings? He consciously strove to eliminate what he called "variety and interest" by gradually and radically reducing the possibility of variation, standardizing the color, size, shape, and composition of his paintings, and eventually eliminating all but black, the five-foot square, and the nine-square grid. There is no mark of the hand, no overt declaration of the individual in these pictures, except, of course, for the undeniable fact that *someone* has chosen to make them, and not to make something else. Rejection—of historical precedents, of alternative possibilities—was a key activity for Reinhardt. Speaking of the modern artist's relationship to the traditional art, he said, "[T]he modern artist knows more and is able to reject a lot more. The rejections are central. If you reject something you're not back to that which you started with in the first place."

There's a greater range of blacks than you would have thought possible in these paintings, but I am not sure that these tour-de-force nuances are as important as their ultimate blackness: black, the color of negation and death; black, the absence of all light; black, the presence of all chromatic color. It's as if Reinhardt made visible the shutting down of sight. The paradox is that these paintings, apparently intended to address only the eye, without rhetoric, overt emotion, symbolism, or personal reference (not to mention any vestige of illusion or even of the history of their making), depend on means that the human eye can barely detect. Where could Reinhardt have gone

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

from here? The black paintings absorbed his energy and his pictorial intelligence for more than a decade. Could he have gone on with them, had he lived longer? Would he have eventually had to stop painting, having exhausted the possibilities of what Dore Ashton referred to as the region of "the almost," where Reinhardt's art lay?

Which brings me back to that alternative reading of these paintings. There is something inherently contrary, even outrageous, about Reinhardt's desire "to make paintings about nothing," as he frequently put it, and to make them so impenetrable that they were also virtually invisible. The man who painted those red, blue, and black paintings was, after all, the same man who reveled in his razor-sharp wit and his slightly nasty aphorisms about art. There's something intensely *willful* about those black paintings and something rather hostile in Reinhardt's expecting anyone to pay attention to them.

If Reinhardt remains puzzling, that is not surprising, given the ambiguity and mixed signals of his work as a whole—as opposed to the apparent forthrightness of individual paintings. What is still less surprising is why he should be the focus of attention right now. It's no accident, but yet another symptom of the way art gets looked at and thought about these days, even the most declaratively, undeniably *visual* art, even, in this instance, art whose maker was adamant about its referring only to itself and not to its maker. The very question of what painting could address was at the heart of Reinhardt's difficult relations with the Abstract Expressionist generation. And that quarrel has a great deal to do, I suspect, with why the Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, mounted this exhibition.

Reinhardt was a contemporary of the Abstract Expressionists. Like most of them, he was employed by the WPA, a member of the Artists' Union and the Artists' Congress. He exhibited with them, protested with them, ate and drank with them, argued with them, showed at the same galleries as they did, had his work looked at by them. His mature work was different from the gestural, layered, worked-looking canvases of de Kooning, or even from the thickly painted, nervous images of Still, but it wasn't unrelated to the more reticent, ambiguous paintings of Rothko or even, in some ways, Pollock. The motivation was quite different, as Reinhardt made quite clear, in his contemptuous dismissals of the transcendental soul-searching of orthodox Abstract Expressionism, but there were, nevertheless, some deep similarities of attitude. William Rubin notes this, in his catalogue preface: "[T]he purely optical adjustment that Reinhardt's later paintings posit for the real experience of the picture constitutes a kind of willed barrier. This requirement testifies to the dislike, indeed fear, of being too readily understood, which Reinhardt shared with this generation. . . . For all his differences with his coevals, Reinhardt shows himself in this regard as more a member of the Abstract Expressionist generation than that of the Minimalists who were subsequently drawn to his art."

But Reinhardt came to regard Abstract Expressionism itself as slightly suspect, impure. "[P]ure abstract art is very limited as to what can be read into it," he declared. "Abstract Expressionist art, on the other hand, is very open, in that people can read their own wishes and fantasies and subjectivities into it. Pure abstract art doesn't permit that." His old friend Stuart Davis would have agreed, even allowing for his dislike of the word "abstract" and his less rigorous separation of the provinces of art and life. "Too much is expected of Art," Davis wrote, "that it mean all kinds of things and is the solution to questions no one can answer. Art is much simpler than that. It's pretensions more modest. Art is a sign, an insignia to celebrate the faculty for invention."

You'd never know that from the catalogue of the Ad Reinhardt retrospective. It's a handsomely produced volume that makes a valiant stab at photographing the unphotographable and reproducing the invisible. William Rubin's introduction is straightforward, perceptive, and to the point, dis-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cussing briefly but informatively the salient characteristics of Reinhardt's work, and charting how that work has been perceived in the quarter century since his death. There's a fine selection of Reinhardt's own writings and a few of the cartoons. But the major essay, by Yve-Alain Bois of Johns Hopkins University, is another matter altogether. It reveals an art-political agenda that Reinhardt, who scrupulously separated art and life, might have found extremely distasteful, although I suppose he brought it all on himself when he jotted down a phrase, sometime in the 1960s, that people like Bois were bound to pounce on: a "sign which refuses to signify." The essay begins with the now obligatory quotations from Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss, and ends with the equally obligatory reference to Jacques Derrida. Reinhardt himself does get the *last* word, but that may be because Bois thinks so well of him as a writer and thinker, rather than because of his central role as painter of the exhibition. Bois writes: "Anyone interested in the development of recent historiography cannot help but notice the similarity of Reinhardt's brilliant conception of history with that of structuralism; any avid reader of his writings (and I hold them among the most cogent texts written by an artist during this loquacious century, certainly the most pointed) cannot fail to see how this strategy informs his aesthetic." (The grammatical solecism apart, you do have to admire anyone who can get that many trendy buzz-words into so few sentences.)

Most of the essay is devoted to an analysis of the shortcomings and inconsistencies of Clement Greenberg's criticism, a strategy that clearly informs Bois's aesthetic. His reasoning goes roughly like this: Greenberg equated modernism with painting's gradually purging itself of anything not particular to itself and to the properties of its medium. The "ultimate" Greenbergian modernist canvas, Bois implies, would be an uninflected monochrome expanse—that is to say, something very like a late Reinhardt.

Hence, Greenberg ought to have admired Reinhardt extravagantly, but since he didn't (and I gather Reinhardt didn't like him much, either) Bois sees this as proof of inadequacy and poor thinking on Greenberg's part. Yet he also takes great exception to Greenberg's having modified his views, over the years, as his eye and his aesthetic evolved, driven by his intense, first-hand experience of works of art; in Bois's view, it appears, a critic should remain steadfast in his preconceptions, no matter what the visual evidence.

All of this is supposed to bolster Reinhardt's claim for our attention and enhance our perception of his seriousness, since it further separates him from the Abstract Expressionists, whom the deeply politically correct perceive as bad guys whose place in the history of recent American art was secured, not by virtue of their art, but by a politically expedient (capitalist, imperialist, white male heterosexual dominated) conspiracy, aided and abetted, if not single-handedly led by the arch-villain, Greenberg. Removing Reinhardt from the context of his contemporaries and friends, the artists with whom his aesthetic overlapped at many points in his development, even though it diverged in many respects, turns him into a "marginalized," as opposed to a mainstream, artist and apparently makes him much more acceptable to an audience tuned into present-day issues of perception.

None of this modish blather, however, is Reinhardt's fault. He trusted his paintings to speak for themselves and disliked the notion that they could generate rhetoric. "Art is art-as-art and everything else is everything else," he wrote. "Art-as-art is nothing but art. Art is not what is not art." I wonder what he would have made of a generation of artists and critics who profoundly mistrust both the visual and the physical aspects of painting and sculpture, who seem to believe that only words can carry what I recently heard a rising youngish art writer describe as "heavy content." This writer suggested that since younger artists don't seem to be able to make images that are expressive—he said it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in a rather more elevated way, something about "mediated experience"—they rely on words and literary narrative to get said "heavy content" across. The assumption is, apparently, that abstraction is empty and only figuration or explicit texts are capable of conveying content, heavy or otherwise.

If we listen to William Rubin, in his catalogue preface, Reinhardt has been accorded this splendidly conceived, elegant overview in part to reaffirm art's right to make wordless demands on its viewer—a reassuring notion, in light of Bois's efforts to turn Reinhardt into a painter with a program. "Nonfigurative as well as Pop-related painting has increasingly privileged those styles that favor instantaneous delivery and maximal immediate impact over solicitation of searching, meditative viewing. The visitor who 'does' the Ad Reinhardt retrospective at three miles an hour will literally not see it." Whether one concludes, at the end of that "searching meditative viewing," that Reinhardt is an unsung giant of his generation or merely a strong, individual, but ultimately not-quite-in-the-very-first-rank painter is open to debate. He's still not the passion of my life, but I'm glad someone did the show. It's good to see a vote of confidence for painting-as-painting, devoid of irony or sociological-political-ethnic polemic—*pace* Professor Bois.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Poems *by Frederick Morgan, Paul Mariani & Mary Stewart Hammond*

After Shen Zhou

A single chime of jade across the waters

as along this rocky shore the moment expands
and somewhere within it is hidden a dwelling apart
to which only the absolute ones make good their escape.

The Way seems not to exist (so the master taught)
and yet it is there—and springtime returns once more,
ageless and unreclaimed, to the inner lands.
What purity! The peach trees are in blossom,
birds chirp and stir, and there by the narrow stream
two white-robed figures wait to greet my crossing . . .

Shall I not make my move at last, and join them?

—Frederick Morgan

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dolores

After the night of pain
you did your vanishing act,
Dolores—I didn't see you again
through all that winter of war.

Those "white and heavy limbs"
on which my own would rest
after our lust had run its course
withdrew into the chill

of far New England towns
from which as winter waned
you sent your fitful messages,
obscure and menacing.

"There'll never be an end!"
"I need the pain you bring me."
"I'll come to you once more, and kneel—
and you'll be mine for ever."

Black ink on pale mauve paper—
your bold and spidery hand . . .
The words cut deep as they were meant,
they left a bitter yearning,

yet I withheld reply
and let the pain absorb
trusting that when those wounds had healed
I'd still be unforgiving.

You weren't quite divine,
you see, for all your beauty,
for all that marbled reticence
masking the inner fires—

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

not yet a perfect idol
despite your cold eyelids
and brazen cruelty of gaze—
no, I could not concede it,

but glimpsed you in my dreams
as a frail puppet-thing
with eyes like dead-bright moons, stumbling
alone down endless vistas . . .

And so when next we met,
one pale midsummer night,
I kissed you once and set you free
in that new wilderness.

—Frederick Morgan

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Variations on a theme by Justice

Miami sunlight, as in a painting
by the poet Donald Justice:
a V of three pelicans drifting south
past the condos and the royal palms,
aflame now with the green scent
of coconut & parrot. Out, out
towards the darker waters
the pelicans keep drifting . . .

I watch my in-laws, both eighty now,
shift about their small apartment
here north of the city, and guess
at what it is they must be thinking:
the brilliance of some perfect noon,
the doctor staring down into the shallows
of their eyes, as the soul slips now
through the gaping fissures . . .

It is what we always think about,
though we mask it every way we can . . .
and think instead of sunlight in Miami,
as in a painting by the poet Donald
Justice, which shows the keylime
cobalt brilliance of a surging
Gulf Stream, and in the background
three dots drifting slowly out to sea . . .

—Paul Mariani

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Heirlooms lost

You know how people bury a thing—mostly, it broods,
Tudor-style, walled-off and left to the vines
in some overgrown plot on the moors of the brain, with
one light burning in an upper window.

For two long-lost cousins, the scene of the crime
was an Edenic house in the southern mountains called
Redlands, half-timbered and possessed of an angelic light,
come back from the dead at the sight of each other

standing on a finger pier on a New England waterfront.
He is costumed in foul-weather gear, waiting for the launch.
Their eyes meet, his such a match for the harbor
behind him they seem openings in his head.

Sun tags the water under the pier and sparks fly
between them, up through the gap-toothed boards,
ricocheting like bitten words in a feud so civil
it never happened, mocking the blue sparks that used to fly

at Redlands, decades before the fall, when cousins
played tag after dark in their grandparents' living room
charging their feet on the Oriental rug, fingers cocked,
loaded with electricity. Now, neither moves,

their feet locked in estrangement not of their making,
while halyards, clanking against aluminum masts,
call like a hundred spoons on goblets for silence
deeper than these years of held fire, deep enough

to hear the cowbells in the pastures at Redlands
from inside the house, where, as evening seeped
down the sky like blueing to meet the mountains,
their two small bodies, warm from baths,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had knelt at the window listening to the herd
carry their swollen udders to the barn. The fat notes
of their bells and low anguish gave them goose bumps
the way the chop of the harbor, glimmering

behind the hero like repoussé, like the sea of silver
that had awaited division on the sideboards and tables
in their grandparents' dining room, does the heroine, now.
Tell me, dear reader, where can our hero turn

but to the sea? Yet, what is there for him
in that direction but a waterscape stolen with mirages
of ill-gotten goods: that hammered sea of roses and daisies,
poppies and pear blossoms, bobbing and sparkling,

lapping against the cloisonné marsh enameled with sun
where the water ripples down into the bas-relief
on the underside of Sandwich glass, that inner harbor
lying flat and sandy-blue as the missing hall carpet,

seagulls rising off of it as if the tiny birds that cousins
had hunted in the carpet's trees and flowers were flushed
from its warp and woof, that pavé ocean beyond, winking
between dunes, no bigger than a brooch, and lurking

in the deep ground, the one light burning at Redlands.
Should the cousins speak, the arched front door could creak
open on the night in question. He shifts his weight, appears
to turn toward her. The black iron latch depresses,

and the launch arrives. Without looking back, the hero
boards and, plowing off into the repoussé meadow, illusions
retained, loses body at five knots, enters the dazzle
and vanishes as if it had been he, instead of his mother,

who had crawled on hands and knees out of her old room
into the darkened house, shedding human form as she
wound over Persian carpets from room to room, while
Presbyterian ancestors, wide awake on the walls above,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dreamed on and looked to the next world, as was
this family's wont, varnished eyes full of the elect,
and male heirs, returned grey-haired and balding
to boyhood rooms for their mother's funeral, slept.

Only the narrow dividing of the carpets' pile,
parting and closing, betrayed the creature's glide
through the Persian flora and fauna, filching not only
objects passed honorably from generation to generation,

but, not valuing that her people were American glass
and easily broken, also bearing, with her slide
into the crack of light spilling under her door,
cousins, family, myth, the whole paradise of blindness.

—Mary Stewart Hammond

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Theater

Euripides in Paris, Shakespeare in London

by Donald Lyons

Reimagining a classic play must start with a scholar's respectful awareness of the past. It is just the opposite of injecting a quick fix of topical politics. And yet such a task must involve, at some level, a consideration of recent history and the nature of human relationships in our time. Two wondrously successful strategies of reimagination—one profound, one not so profound yet vigorous and valid—have lately been at work in productions in Paris and London.

In Paris, Ariane Mnouchkine and her company, called Le Théâtre du Soleil, have undertaken to stage four Greek tragedies, each play on a separate evening. By this fall, all four will be in repertory. Only three were on in late May and June, when I was there, and I was able to get tickets to but one—and that thanks solely to a metro and bus strike that led to numerous no-shows. The overall title of the project is *Les Atrides* (Descendants of Atreus, father of Agamemnon and Menelaus); the plays are Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* and Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, *Choephori*, and *Eumenides*. (The last three constitute, of course, a unified trilogy, the *Oresteia*, first put on in 458 B.C.) Thus will be told, in coherent mythical chronology, the story of Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia on the way to Troy, Agamemnon's murder by his wife Clytemnestra on returning from Troy, Clytemnestra's slaying by her son Orestes, and Orestes' trial for matricide.

The play I saw was *Iphigenia at Aulis*, in a faithful translation by Jean and Mayotte Bollack. Euripides had left Athens in 408, late in the Peloponnesian War, for reasons unknown, and gone to reside at the court of the king of Macedon. He died there in the winter of 407-6. In the spring of 405 his son produced in Athens the *Iphigenia* (together with the *Bacchae*, that drama about Dionysus's irruption into Thebes which gave Nietzsche so much purchase for generalization). The posthumous production won Euripides one of his few first prizes.

It is one of Euripides' finest plays. Commander-in-Chief Agamemnon has sent for his daughter to come to the port of Aulis, where the whole Greek fleet is becalmed. He has done this in order to sacrifice her to Artemis, as a seer has ordered. As the play begins, a torn Agamemnon repents of his intended filicide and is sending a second letter countermanding the first. This is intercepted by his vain, egomaniacal brother Menelaus (husband of Helen, cause of the war), who upbraids his brother with cowardice. The quarrel is interrupted by the arrival of the young girl, delirious with joy at the sight of her beloved papa and at the prospect of marrying Achilles (the pretext given in the summons). She is accompanied—surprise! —by her doting mother Clytemnestra, who is eager to superintend the wedding. The father welcomes his adored daughter warmly, but his dissembling spoils the encounter with his wife. He leaves. Enter Achilles, angrily demanding the martial show be gotten on the road. Clytemnestra greets him

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with coy teasing about the coming alliance; the chaste warrior reacts with horror. The (almost comic) misunderstanding clarified by a servant, the queen begs Achilles to save her daughter from death. He agrees. Agamemnon is next bombarded by the outrage of his wife and the pathos of his daughter, who holds up her weeping little brother Orestes. Agonized, the king holds firm, citing the honor of all Greece. Achilles enters to warn against a mob of Greeks gathering to seize Iphigenia. At this point, in the most notorious volte-face in Greek tragedy, condemned by Aristotle, Iphigenia suddenly announces she will gladly give her life for Greece and glory. Achilles falls in love with her nobility of gesture and offers to assist her, suggesting they stash arms alongside the altar in case she changes her mind again at the last minute. Her mother, not at all reconciled to this turn of events, clings furiously to her daughter's robes to the last, spurning the ecstatic singing of Iphigenia, who marches off to immolation. A messenger announces that a miraculous substitution of a doe for the girl has been effected. Iphigenia now dwells among the gods. Agamemnon rejoices. Clytemnestra is suspicious of the whole story. The chorus wishes Agamemnon bon voyage to and from Troy.

This, then, is the Euripidean work Mnouchkine has prefaced to the *Oresteia*. Some of its psychological inflections are more sophisticated and sprightly than those of the older dramatist, and there are a few disparities of plot (in the *Agamemnon*, for instance, Iphigenia is truly sacrificed). But the use of the later play as an introduction is on the whole inspired. It brings out, if anything, how much Euripides and Aeschylus have in common.

Deep in the handsome, densely wooded Parc de Vincennes on the far east of Paris, Napoleon built five artillery depot-factories; they are now known as the Cartoucherie and function as theaters, one occupied by the Théâtre du Soleil. One enters a long sunny hall dominated by a huge round map of Greece (land in red, sea in beige). Texts of ancient dramas and dictionaries of mythology lie open on lecterns placed about this hall. Incense lightly perfumes the air. Polite but coolly self-possessed people clad in blue-cinched black tunics and billowing pants sell yogurt, rice, vegetables, tea. Uh oh, I thought, the orientalizing Sixties are back upon us . . . shades of the Living Theater and Peter Brook.

After a spell in the hall, one proceeds through a darker interstitial chamber lit dimly from above; it consists of bridgelike walkways spanning earthen pits in which half-buried statues of horses and of twelve elders seem frozen in a struggle to emerge from the earth. Between this chamber and the actual theater are the performers' dressing rooms, open to view behind a mesh screen; they blithely fuss with greaves and masks. It was getting to me—the demythologizing openness abutting the numinous pits.

In the theater itself, a raked bank of bare benches faces a long, bare, skylit rectangle of space (it is 7:40 on a spring night)—back wall and floors painted in terra cotta, side walls and cornices in blue. An orchestra clad in Indian garb is heard throughout—drums and flutes above all, though often swollen with strings. The music, by Jean-Jacques Lemêtre, is frenetically percussive, saltatory, alert, angry.

The persons of the drama are masked; they move hieratically; they ordinarily make their entrances by running down from a tall sloped ramp wheeled up the center aisle to the very edge of the stage. They bound onstage in full attitude, freeze for a moment, and speak. It is different with the chorus. They pounce on in great catlike leaps; they are supposed to be curious, sightseeing women from the nearby island of Calchis and wear yellow pants, yellow hats, and red brocade jackets. Under the leadership of the coryphée (Catherine Schaub) they rush avidly about reviewing all the great ships and captains with touristic fervor. After the clash of the royal brothers they return to dance for joy at what they suppose to be the upcoming marriage.

Then comes the first of the great tableaux and the first appearance of the eccyclema, a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

towering platform wheeled up from the rear of the stage toward the audience. Atop it are Iphigenia, Clytemnestra, and little Orestes in a still life of joy. Descending from it the girl naïvely embraces her father. The fluid, never naturalistic plastique and keening voice of Nirupama Nityanandan as Iphigenia were profoundly touching here and throughout.

Simon Abkarian plays both Agamemnon and Achilles, as was doubtless intended by the author—they share no scenes. The king was necessarily a study in gloomy anguish, but the Achilles, in chalk-white face and red skirt, was a brilliant, even funny study in haughty misogyny; he sat impassively idol-like while Clytemnestra crouched pleading at his feet, in a pose recalling Ingres's *Jupiter and Thetis.* She makes a good case, saying that to kill Iphigenia to recover Helen (her sister) is to buy the worst with the best.

The chorus, to flutes and drums, sing of the nuptials of Thetis and Peleus, parents of Achilles, but it is a neurotic, conflicted marriage song, switching sharply from festivity to the coming slaughter of the unwed Iphigenia.

With Achilles gone and Agamemnon back, Iphigenia sinuously pleads for her life, exploiting the little Orestes. Refused, she executes a monodic dance of despair, full of Indian-seeming knee, hand, and foot postures. At the sudden change of mind, Achilles is thunderstruck with admiration ("Quelle magnifique dame!") but her mother rages. Iphigenia now orders the chorus to dance a paean to Artemis, demander of her death. She and the chorus dance their praise of the gods' ways while Clytemnestra darts among them attempting to stop the dance. Then the eccyclema appears again. This time it represents the altar, Iphigenia in white atop it stretching out her neck to the priest's knife. Freeze frame.

After the news of the miraculous rescue, the chorus, to no words but to an endless drumbeat, whirl deliberately off, each choreutes vouchsafed a full spin of farewell. Left crouching in coiled rage, slumped in a corner of the very far rear stage, is Clytemnestra, a ticking bomb.

The pervasive Indianness of dance, music, and mime was clearly not a superficial flavoring, not an appliquéd bright idea, but a nurtured product of a serious and organic company ethos. It seemed earned and wise. It proved a flexible instrument, capable of wit, joy, and horror. And its felicity was more than artistic; it seemed to reflect the very situation of ancient Greece. The program aptly cited Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*: "Placed between India and Rome . . . the Greeks managed a classically pure third mode of existence. They could not maintain it for long themselves, but for that very reason it endures for all time. . . . Let us ask then what medicine it was that gave the Greeks in the greatest period . . . the ability not to exhaust themselves either in ecstatic brooding or a restless bid for universal power and glory but rather to attain that marvelous combination possessed by a noble wine, which at once heats the blood and induces meditation. In order to answer this question we must think of tragedy, whose stimulating and purifying power affected the whole populace and whose supreme value we shall not realize until we see it, as the Greeks did, as the embodiment of all prophylactic powers, reconciling the strongest and most precarious qualities of a nation."[1] Conforming to the Nietzschean insight, the Théâtre du Soleil used the Indian as thesis: a currently audible and visible civilization (as no willed re-creation of antique Greece could be) out of whose "ecstatic brooding" the communal parts of tragedy might have arisen. The named characters of the drama were the antithetic, thrusting, restless "Roman" individuals. The synthesis is tragedy, a horror story that, precisely by being mediated through such beautiful forms, becomes, in Nietzsche's words, "art and play." Ariane Mnouchkine's remarkable accomplishment at the Cartoucherie (again, I saw but one of four plays) is to have elaborated a metaphoric style adequate not only to giving a sense that a Greek tragedy might have looked and sounded *like* this. Her work also, more pro-

1 The English is Francis Golffing's.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

foundly, embodies what a Greek tragedy might have meant: passions and egos thirsty for reason and justice confronted with the imperatives of dance and song and music. Logos versus melos.

All I had known of Mnouchkine was a movie she wrote and directed in 1978 about the life of Molière. In it Molière's early years with the *commedia dell'arte* Béjart troupe were depicted, with much happily penniless rollicking and roistering, not as a seedtime but as his finest hour. When he went to Paris to write comedies under the patronage of Louis XIV, he was selling out to imperialism, etc. The actual plays, implied the film, would have been well lost had their author kept on doing farces for and with "the people." Court kills. Mnouchkine has now far transcended this philistinism. She has entered the court of art and is doing the work she was born for. *Les Atrides* is the most exciting and innovative theatrical experience on earth.

Richard III at the Royal National Theatre in London, directed by Richard Eyre and starring Sir Ian McKellen, showed the power of a clever concept and a lucky moment to inform and energize Shakespeare's early melodrama. Setting and tone are all: we are in the England of Between the Wars—a more flexible conceit than the old Mercury Theater's setting of Shakespeare in overtly fascist countries. The first scenes are quick and abstract. Richard comes on as a Haig-like general deformed by the Great War. His deformity here amounts to a permanently bent, rigid arm; he is forever taking jackets off and on and asking women to help him, using this reptilian tactility to charm away their initial repulsion. His brother Clarence (David Collings) is in black tie and cape. Princess Anne (Helene Kvale), the wooed widow, is a platinum blonde in a tight satin sheath. Later scenes at court are dominated by a long, candelabra-laden banquet table presided over by Queen Elizabeth (Clare Higgins) in clinging silver lamé. Old Queen Margaret potters about prophesying in a Miss Havisham vein. Other royals, including a wheelchair-bound King Edward IV and his mother, have a bit the look (not overemphasized) of real 1930 Windsor royals like George V and Mary. The little Princes get to play with toy trains and, when the older becomes Edward V, get to arrive on a real train with a real red carpet and be welcomed by their dear uncle. By now this uncle is moving center stage, politically speaking. McKellen speaks in the half-swallowed, mildly querulous, flutily tenoric voice so characteristic of the Brit upper class; he toys spastically with cigarettes, cigarette cases, cups of coffee; he snuffs the banquet candles. It is a devastating and chilling impersonation.

Richard's dismissed associates are hauled screaming from corporate boardrooms whose decorum Richard pointedly violates. It now looks like the years of Appeasement: types like Chamberlain and Eden and Hoare are being masticated by an Oswald Mosley. All played in a suave, *Brideshead*-from-hell decor.

Then the grab for power. Now the production begins really to terrify. A coy Protector Richard perches with his spiritual advisers atop a crane while crony Buckingham pleads with him through a microphone; the mob seconds the plea. Cut to King Richard enthroned atop the floodlit crane whence he Nuremberg-style harangues the mob. The stage is covered by a big Nazi-ish banner depicting a rearing white stallion and a naked youth with flag. (Buckingham is soon blindfolded and stripped in a Lubyanka-like dungeon.) The iconography, the orchestration, the orgasmic demagoguery, the sinister trapdoors into torture—all evoke the totalitarian Thirties with a mesmeric power.

Such is the visceral potency of this *Richard III* that even the good guys—Richmond (later Henry VII) and his allies—come to life. They are got up as jolly decent World War II officer types in khaki, brisk and crisp and modest and wielding those small batons. This "democratic" simplicity (there's a hint of George VI in Richmond) works as perfect foil to the grandiose megalomania of Richard; their plainness is refreshing because it dissolves what we have felt as genuine evil. The magniloquent, new-day/new-England

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

oratory of Richmond for once thrills. The eve-of-battle dream visitations in which the victims return to curse Richard and to cheer (even, in the enchanting instance of Queen Elizabeth, to dance with) Richmond are unforced and moving. Richard delivers a final berserk, spitting, Hitlerian tirade from the crane before coming to earth for a protracted mortal wriggle and rattle on the ground in clanky silver armor.

Richard III, of course, lacks the moral complexities within individuals and poetic complexities within language that mark such supreme plays as *Macbeth* or *Coriolanus*. But just for that reason, perhaps, this vivid production, full of wickedly shining surfaces like silver and satin, can so adequately inhabit and enlarge the text. The line of least resistance with *Richard III* has been to turn it into savagely baroque comedy, as in the Olivier film. Here Eyre and McKellen—masters of fear both—succeed in something harder; they really scare by capturing the ontogeny and efflorescence of a totalitarian tyranny. Their modern stylizings, accomplished with large-gestured brio and acted, down to the smallest role, with point and bite, do not obscure but illumine the story. As this awful century crawls to an end with one of its most barbaric and costly totalitarianisms in apparent disarray, *Richard III* as presented here seems to have a startling message. It de-ideologizes tyranny. Richard had no ideology; he had pride, hatred, ego. When the final reckoning is made, will all the conceptual gibberish of Marxism, Leninism, Stalinism, socialism, National Socialism, Fascism be seen as anything but rusty armor clanking over pride, hatred, ego?

A few items in the program need comment, for they belie the production's best achievements and instincts. A little essay by Barbara Everett, an academic, instructs us in what to think. She remarks on "the sheer entertainingness of Richard . . . making up his life as he goes along: even writing it, like a playscript." The first cliché about the entertaining Richard is precisely what this mounting subverts (to use a word I'm sure she likes); the second genuflection to self-referentiality is just the kind of empty chic avoided here. Everett, understandably finding the play "central to the interests of the later twentieth century," adduces the parallel of . . . Watergate (so much graver to her thinking, perhaps, than, say, Cambodia). And Sir Ian himself writes a note about the production's European tour in which he affectingly describes the electric relevance of the play to newly free spectators in Bucharest but is unable to resist a nostalgic backward glance: "In Czechoslovakia, Romania, and East Germany before their revolutions, theatres were well-favoured. Drama students were guaranteed jobs for life in societies where unemployment was illegal. The new freedoms include the freedom to be out of work. Long-established theatre companies are being disbanded, actors on the breadline." Sir Ian thinks he is arguing here for continued state subvention of the theater. He seems unaware of the moral quicksand he's on. His argument works in fact against him: if such squalid tyrannies subsidized theaters (and with what result, and spare me Brecht), then perhaps free societies ought to let the market rule the stage. Actually, of course, his own RNT is a strong argument for some public funding—in Britain, at least, where living dramatic traditions are at work. Even so, Sir Ian McKellen might cast an eye to the foot of his own essay, where a note informs us: "The 1990 tour and Belfast season were sponsored by Guinness Brewing Worldwide."

EPILOGUE: New York, if incapable of achievement on these levels, can offer a minor surprise. After roasting last summer's *Richard III* in Central Park, I gladly praise this summer's intelligent *Othello*, with a lucid, uncluttered *mise en scène* by Irish director Joe Dowling, a creepily witty Iago in Christopher Walken, and a smart Emilia in Mary Beth Hurt. With its next production, though, the New York Shakespeare Festival went back to its old ways with a naked, lusitanophone *Midsummer Night's Dream* from Brazil. I missed it.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art

A tale of three cities

by Jed Perl

Montreal, that serene and congenial city, is an unlikely host for an immense exhibition dedicated to the historical origins of the urban maelstrom. Yet "The 1920s: Age of the Metropolis" has been a hit at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, where it was up all summer and continues into November.[1] Both the locals and the tourists seem to enjoy going through this extended tour of Berlin, Paris, and New York in the years after World War I. At the Museum of Fine Arts one can gawk at images of the cafés and cabarets of more than half a century ago, with their pig-faced sugar daddies and transvestite performers, or study the plans for multi-level glass cities that one is now quite sure nobody would ever be happy living in. And after one's visit is over one can go out into a middle-sized city where modern buildings live on easy terms with old ones, where McGill University and quiet residential neighborhoods and huge office towers are cheek-by-jowl, where office workers can actually take a lunch break on a blanket on the grass. Montreal is a sane city: this is what makes it such a dramatic setting for a show about a period when a lot of sophisticated people would have rather died than admit to being totally sane. While the Berlin, Paris, and New York of sixty years ago were undoubtedly more livable than the same cities are today, the fact is that after World War I you went to these places to lose your sanity —to become a dreamer or a degenerate, to become something (anything: even an artist) that the folks back home were not.

What Berlin, Paris, and New York were about in the 1920s was, of course, a whole lot of things, and this show is unabashedly open about the variety. Dozens—maybe hundreds —of viewpoints are represented. The show includes celebrations of the individual and the crowd. The six curators, who worked under the direction of Jean Clair, director of the Musée Picasso in Paris, are interested in high life and low life, in public life and private life, in aristocrats and workers and artists—in just about everybody and anything. Just contemplate a selection of the objects included: a De Havilland 60X Moth biplane, a painting by Mondrian, a Josephine Baker poster, photographs of factories by Albert Renger-Patzsch, a tapestry screen by Dufy, Art Deco bedroom furniture by Jacques-Emile Ruhlmann, architectural drawings by Hugh Ferriss, Metaphysical paintings by Alberto Savinio, a cocktail shaker in the shape of a dirigible, a Picasso drawing of Satie, a painting of a New York street by Reginald Marsh, books illustrated by Robert Delaunay and Léger, a Bugatti Royale automobile.

The show, which sprawls over eighteen galleries and two floors of the museum, begins

1 "The 1920s: Age of the Metropolis" opened on June 20, 1991, at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, and remains on view through November 10. A catalogue, edited by Jean Clair, has been published by the MMFA, and is available in both an English and a French edition (638 pages, $100 Canadian).

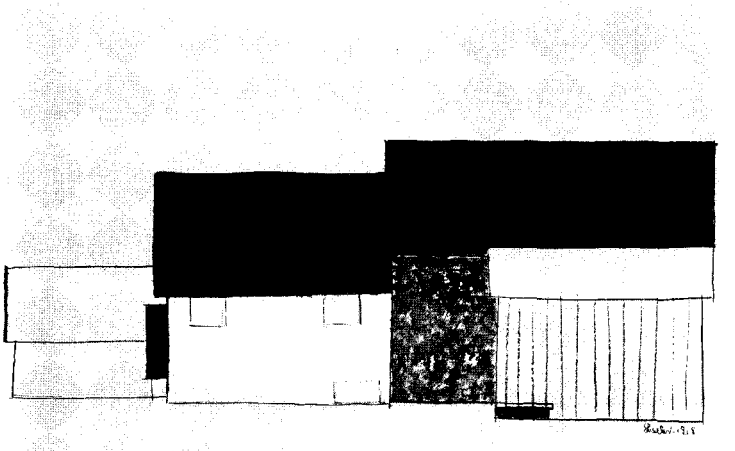
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Knoedler

Works on Paper
by Gallery Artists

September 7 to October 3, 1991

19 East 70 Street, New York Telephone (212) 794-0550



CHARLES
SHEELER
Bucks County
Barn, 1918
Gouache on
paper
15 x 21¼ in.

Hirschl & Adler Galleries Inc.
21 East 70th Street New York 10021
Telephone (212) 535-8810

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in Berlin, moves through Paris, and ends in New York. Its subject is actually two-fold: the city as reality, and the city as dream. Thus we see the reality (no doubt heightened) of the mean streets of Berlin through the eyes of Otto Dix, George Grosz, Max Beckmann, and a host of others. And we see the utopian cities that the international avant-garde that gathered in Berlin—it included at various times Gropius, El Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy—made the subject of some of its most radical work. In Paris the reality has to do with late-afternoon light in the artists' studios of Montparnasse, with beautifully coiffed women, with the iconic presence of the Eiffel Tower. Meanwhile, the artists are turning the Parisian streetscape into a paradigmatic dreamscape: Atget photographs the mannequins in the shop windows so that they look like dancers in spooky ballets; Léger paints the entire city, with its giant advertising posters, as if it were one panoramic Cubist collage. Some sections of the show are tightly focused: for example, a room devoted to the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. But inevitably there are a lot of loose connections: the Berlin section becomes a Constructivist catch-all, including buildings done in Utrecht and the South of France; there are a few English posters in a hallway toward the end of the show. I think a little curatorial rambling is healthy in an exhibition like this. Even as one is wondering why some things are included (and why works by others aren't: where are Joaquín Torres-García and Alexander Calder?) one does get the general drift. When I arrived at the final gallery in the New York section, where the Old World dream of a glass city is beginning to become a New World reality, I felt that Jean Clair and his six curators had come through with their dignity intact.

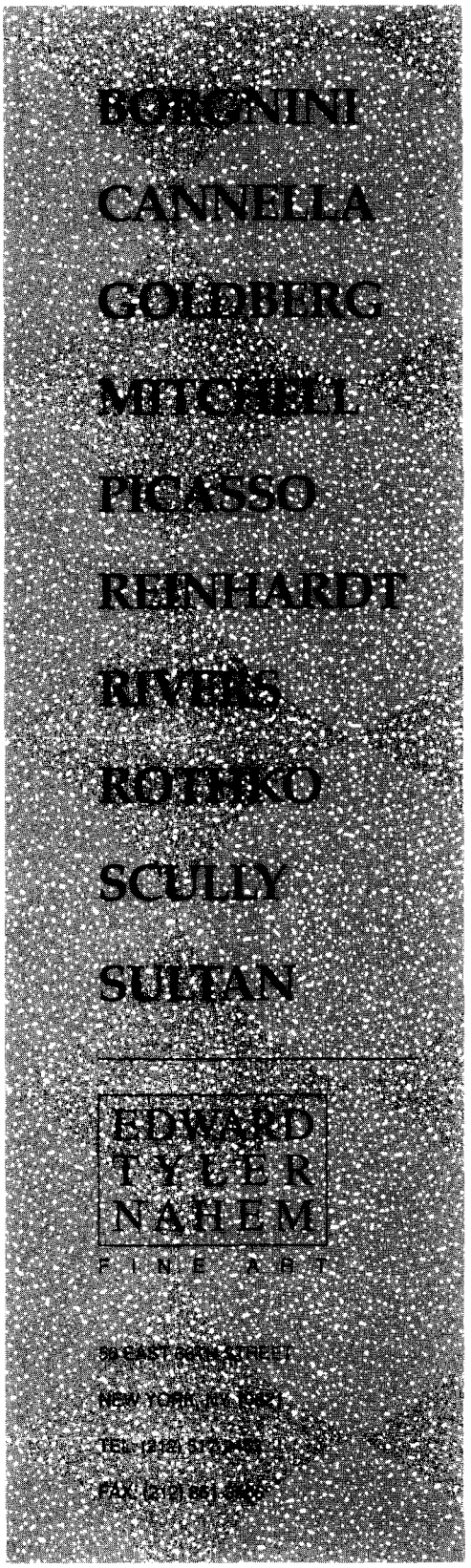
For the many visitors to the museum who are unfamiliar with the cultural history of the period beyond some vague notions about F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Roaring Twenties, "Age of the Metropolis" probably functions like a crackerjack college survey course. By arranging a vast amount of material in a swift-moving and engaging form, the curators give people access to a world they do not know. Like the professors who run the survey courses, the organizers of "Age of the Metropolis" are playing god. Most survey courses are disasters because the person playing god isn't even close to being up to the job. All things considered, the team responsible for "Age of the Metropolis" plays god pretty well. Jean Clair and his curators have come up with an authentically jazzy reading of the Jazz Age: the rooms devoted to city life are compelling. This isn't a show where the lesson plans oppress our imaginations, as they did at Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik's dictatorial show "High & Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture," which was at MOMA a year ago. (The comparison isn't gratuitous: the shows cover a good deal of the same ground.) But I nevertheless left "Age of the Metropolis" feeling that the curators were taking the god role a little too seriously. In the great survey courses I remember from college there were moments when the teacher was struck a little dumb—when the stream of words was stopped by the realization (the prof's and ours) that something in art or life eluded the explanations. In a show such as "Age of the Metropolis," the equivalent of that moment of hesitation would be finding a way to let the works of art have some space to work their own magic. It doesn't happen here. An artist like Léger, whose paintings present an ebullient vision of the metropolis, feels wedged in. We're getting Jean Clair's view of the 1920s (and it's not bad), but who can blame some of us for regretting that Léger's paintings do not work on us with their full force?

In his introduction to the humongous catalogue (twenty-three essays, count 'em), Clair invokes the writings of Freud, Virginia Woolf, Robert Musil, and Walter Benjamin. We hear about ambivalence and the unconscious. Clair describes a decade full of hesitations, a decade during which people wondered whether they should choose "reverie or revolution, refusal or revival, the stark and frigid realism of the New Objectivity or the uncompromising renovation of social re-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

formers." This is a good riff; and as I read it I felt almost guilty for feeling grumpy about it. I felt grumpy about quibbling with Clair's particular highlighting of 1920s cultural icons. I felt guilty for wondering, "What about Proust, Nabokov, Joyce, Gide, Colette?" Surely Clair could have used them, too. Probably he would agree. The fact that Clair focuses on Musil rather than, say, Gide (whose *Counterfeiters* was published in 1926; Musil didn't begin *The Man without Qualities* until 1930) probably tells us more about Jean Clair and the 1990s Zeitgeist than about the 1920s. We're living in a time when people are particularly interested in the Middle European sensibility of which, as Milan Kundera often reminds us, Musil is a key figure. Nowadays, modern man is more often regarded as a social animal than as an individual, so naturally Musil's great novel, in which matters of state play a large role, comes to the fore. Gide's more internalized and aestheticized view of the modern condition is out of favor. I don't think there's anything wrong with Clair's favoring Musil over Gide—it's his way of playing god. I admire the scope of this show, but the Olympian view can become a little airy. When Clair, at the end of his essay, observes that "the American city, as we see it today, is a city whose streets are deserted"—well, I know that he's probably thinking about Houston, but what about New York and San Francisco and Boston? The thesis gets out of hand.

"The 1920s: Age of the Metropolis" is a show in which the artists are actors in an epic movie about modern times. It's an absorbing movie but the great artists who are on board aren't making anything more than cameo appearances. The arrangement of the show fits neatly with the drift of art-historical scholarship these days, which tends to place individual artists and works of art in the context of social events: World's Fairs, World Wars. This approach often covers interesting ground, but it can also grind artists down. One of the books cited in the catalogue's short list of major references is Kenneth Silver's *Esprit de Corps: The Art of the Parisian*



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Avant-Garde and the First World War, 1914-1925: it has become a touchstone for twentieth-century art history since its publication in 1989, and is doubtless familiar to just about everybody who contributed to "Age of the Metropolis" (Silver's book has already appeared in French). Silver offers every possible political and ideological reason for the fact that during this period artists such as Picasso, Matisse, Derain, Gris, Dufy, and Braque became increasingly attracted to classical forms—but it never seems to occur to Silver that it doesn't take much more than a hard look at Poussin or Ingres or Corot to understand the attraction. Perhaps Silver does not believe in the freedom of the imagination. But I suspect that behind Silver's ideological predilections lies a desire to keep the artists in their place so that he can play director, so that he can orchestrate artists and works of art and social events and what the historians call "material culture" into a beguiling panorama. *Esprit de Corps* offers quite a panorama, and "Age of the Metropolis" explodes that kind of panorama into a crowd pleaser of blockbuster proportions. The new art history, often thought to be esoteric, has a populist side.

There's a lot of very ugly art included in "Age of the Metropolis." A lot of the ugliest work is representational. Ever since the Pompidou Center in Paris mounted "Les Réalismes, 1919-1939" in 1980 (a show which brought early attention to some of the work that interests Silver), art historians have been presenting nit-picking realism as if the very unpleasantness of the results told us something about life. How many more shows are we going to have to go through where the creepy New Objectivity of Christian Schad is presented as a Great Statement? Doesn't it ever occur to these curators that the corpse-like flesh in the works of Christian Schad isn't a metaphor, it's a painting problem? But then the curatorial staff that would include three Schads and not one of Juan Gris's crystalline portrait drawings isn't thinking about art, it's thinking about shock value. Colorful characters—people with major life experience—get special treatment in "Age of the Metropolis." Tamara de Lempicka, that glamorous figure of the international set of the 1920s, is represented with three portrait paintings that are nothing but high-gloss poster art. The curators had the right idea when they included a large number of women in the show: it reflects a sea change in women's expectations and opportunities that came about in this period. But by emphasizing an artist like Lempicka, an Art Deco *pompier*, and excluding completely the work of Anni Albers and Sophie Taeuber-Arp, the organizers give us reason to suspect that they see women not as serious artists but as glamorous hostesses. The textiles that Anni Albers did at the Bauhaus are among the major abstract compositions of the period, and Sophie Taeuber-Arp's contribution to Constructivism is considerable. Did these women fail to make the final cut because they lack the dash of local color that the organizers expect from their female leads?

The show is not without its inspired moments. Josef Albers is shown to advantage, and it's always good to see his work from the Twenties, before he became a square. The experimental spirit of the Twenties is presented through reconstructions of Moholy-Nagy's *Light-Space Modulator* and a section of Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau*—these multi-media works are at once curious, charming, exhilarating, and nerdish. A small room called Glass Architecture makes a brilliant juxtaposition between the little-known paintings of utopian architecture by Wenzel Hablik and some of Paul Klee's reveries on transparent and translucent planes. Hablik (whose paintings and drawings of fantastical architecture have been the subject of some recent shows in Europe) dreamed up cities that look like bizarre crystal structures and painted them in fire-and-ice orchestrations of orange and blue and green. (The paintings are, unfortunately, poorly reproduced in the catalogue.) Juxtaposed with Klee's better-known meditations on a world made of glass planes, Hablik's work suggests the dreamy lucidity of Twenties utopianism. Some of the groupings of photographs included in the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

show are a pleasure: coming upon the elegantly sober compositions of August Sander or Moholy-Nagy or Atget after a wall or two of drawings and paintings, I felt all over again the freshness of which photography is capable, its happy freedom from the problems of making up an image inch by inch. And, all through, there are interesting things: some bizarre paintings by Hannah Hoch (which struck me as having echoes in the work of a contemporary artist who interests me, Trevor Winkfield); a haunting George Ault, *Sullivan Street Abstraction*; Maurice Marinot's luxurious glass bottle, in which gold bubbles and a thick coil of opaque reddish-orange glass add complexities to the grayish transparency of the form.

I went through the show twice, and I kept changing my mind about things—about particular juxtapositions, about particular objects. I felt free to change my mind—which is, I think, a function of the expansive spirit that informs this huge undertaking. Going through, I had the impression that other people were responding to the openness of the plan, too. They could focus their attention on a book illustration, a cigarette case, a poster, a painting. While I can't think of a single painting in the show that's on the masterpiece level, there are many things that are pretty marvelous. Basically, visitors seem happy to be able to slip into the period feeling—and then find that there are many different period feelings. At midpoint there's a way station called the Music Room, with comfortable seating, copies of the $100 catalogue for browsing, and period music piped in. Visitors appreciate the breather—after going through the demanding first half of the show they probably feel that they deserve it.

At the end of the exhibition there's another breather: a movie theater, where period films are shown all through the day. Wilfried Basse's *Market in Berlin* (1929) is fascinating, like a New Objectivity photo album come to life. In fifteen minutes we see the entire cycle of market day—and it has the throwaway elegance of a perfectly orchestrated series of magic tricks. Basse's cool, gently amused view of the quotidian is followed immediately by excerpts from two Harold Lloyd comedies; they make me feel like shouting, "Hooray for Hollywood!" In *Hot Water* (1924), the pale-faced Lloyd is schlepping home a pile of packages and the live turkey he's won in a grocery-store raffle, and his troubles keep multiplying—all the people on the streetcar regard him as the out-of-control loony. In *Safety Last* (1923), the crowds on the sidewalk crane their necks and screech and cheer as Lloyd turns his climb up the side of an office building into a lunatic dance. In the Lloyd movies it's always one-man-against-the-world, and as we watch we see both sides of the confrontation: we're the conformist in the crowd and the nonconformist who can't or won't go along. One way to look at "The 1920s: Age of the Metropolis" is as a show about a whole generation of Harold Lloyds, of misfits who turn out to be determined individualists. In *Hot Water*, when the car drivers won't leave a space for Lloyd to cross the road, he just opens the door of an automobile and climbs right over the passengers. "Age of the Metropolis" is an exhibition about the traffic jam that is the modern city—and the Harold Lloyds of the world who cut their own path. The crowds up in Montreal seem to think that "Age of the Metropolis" is pretty neat, and I don't think that they're entirely wrong.

Publisher's note: Back issues of *The New Criterion* are for sale at $6 each. A list of highlights is available upon request from the Office Manager.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Books

The art and faith of Gerard Manley Hopkins

by Christopher Ricks

The virtues of Robert Bernard Martin's new life of Hopkins are such as to make it not only a good life of a great poet but the best we are likely to have until such time as the world becomes profoundly moved again by those religious controversies that so moved Hopkins.[1] Martin, as in his previous biographies (Kingsley, Tennyson, FitzGerald), does his homework, spade-work, and leg-work; every reader of *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Very Private Life*, even the best informed, will at least have to admit to having learned from it many a new substantial fact about Hopkins and his setting; and since there is no substitute for a biographer's assiduous fair-minded clarity, this is a book to be thanked.

Hopkins's life can have no surprises now, though it had plenty then. Gifted, craving, stubborn, idiosyncratic, and brave in the face of his parents' dismayed resistance, he made his way to the Church of Rome and (*a fortiori?*) to the Society of Jesus. No less bravely, and with no grand preceder here who could be to him in poetry what the tranquilly obdurate Newman had been in religious conversion, Hopkins made his even lonelier way to the heights and depths of his own art. "Slaughter of the innocents": with this laconic journal entry in 1868 he recorded the burning of his early poems, a sacrifice demanded of him (he exacerbatedly believed) by his religious vocation. But the tentative encouragement of his superior upon a later tragic occasion in 1875 released him and his writing—released him *from* and *to*. And thanks to his friend Robert Bridges, who tended (though he also doctored) the manuscripts, the world has since 1918 known the studded studied work of the most original poet of the Victorian age.

Hopkins's two central choices of life were of such a scale, and of so entire a commitment, as to protect him and his story against all pettiness. It is one of the odd but natural accomplishments of Martin's biography that it restores to Hopkins's world the petty things, even the pettifogging ones—the frictions, misunderstandings, squalors, and squabbles—so that there can be felt the sheer plod, and the sheer fret, of so much that went with and came to Hopkins. Balliol competitiveness; the frequency of his enforced moves within the Order; the shabby-genteel institutions, all come down in the world, which housed his life; the number of examination scripts which he had to mark; the unsanitary conditions in Dublin where he enjoyed, or rather didn't, his professorship of Greek: these diverse and daily encroachments gradually coalesce until they are precipitated as Martin's most striking report: that for Hopkins to die as he did when he was nearly forty-five was for him to hit almost exactly the grim "average" for the Society of Jesus: "In 1868 a survey in the Jesuit private journal, *Letters and Notices*, indicated that the life expectancy of a man becoming a novice at twenty-

1 *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Very Private Life*, by Robert Bernard Martin; Putnam, 448 pages, $29.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

one was twenty-three more years rather than the forty years of males of the same age in the general population."

As is now usual even in a biography devoted to movements of mind, we are regularly made privy to such movements of body as Hopkins's diarrhea and his operation for hemorrhoids (performed "by Mr. Gay and Mr. Prance"). And as is now *de rigueur*, sex is not left in peace or unpeace: the new habit is to front us with Hopkins's spilt "old habits," encoded or inscribed by him as "O.H." (where Clough, in *his* diaries, had satisfied himself with an asterisk). But there can be no blanket objection to these layings-bare, and Martin, though he is not always persuasive (is that really what Hopkins's agonized shipwrecked nun means when she cries, "O Christ, Christ, come quickly"?), is not prurient. Hopkins's decision to be circumcised in adulthood is described, pondered, and left in the decent obscurity of its learned footnote (as to whether it was a medical necessity or a psychological need). On the central question of Hopkins's homosexuality, the biographer is circumspect, though occasionally the transitions leave something to be desired. "We have plenty of other evidence to show that Hopkins's most intense physical attraction was to men. The tight Anglo-Catholic circles in which he moved in Oxford were in part substitutes for family life." Or: "Hopkins was certainly moved deeply by his sexual feeling for other men, but there is no proof, or even responsible suggestion, that he ever had sexual relations with anyone else." Well, you could hardly have sexual relations other than with someone else, and there does creep in a less-than-responsible suggestion of anyone-else-than-men.

There is little reason to doubt that Hopkins's instincts were homosexual (there are several journal entries about being tempted by choirboys or by loitering men); there is much reason to doubt that he ever consummated his desires; but there is no reason to doubt that in any case the siege of contraries by which the life of the senses engages the life of the spirit is one which would, whatever Hopkins's predilections of sexuality, have moved, stirred, fascinated, and torn him.

If the whole sexual matter now seems (and not just to the emancipated) to have been overwrought and overfraught in Hopkins's day, it is as well to remember that his day was not of his making. Martin dryly reminds us of that equivocal bath-toiletry issued to the novices: "modesty powder" to render the water opaque. And something must be acknowledged as happening to masochism once it is institutionalized as mortification. I for myself wish that Hopkins had not wished for his hair-shirt, for his sore chain, for his scourge, and for his "custody of the eyes" (the penance of looking nowhere but at the ground); but all of these self-inflictions were not self-inflictions to him, and they are his business—or are his understanding of what it was for him to be about his Father's business. The stakes being what they were for him, he would have gone singing to the stake.

Which brings even a grateful reader of this biography to a clutch of reservations. At no point do you feel that the biographer would go to the stake—or, more damagingly and perhaps less unfairly, that he much feels what it was for Hopkins to be willing to do so, or for others to be willing to go to the stake for Hopkins, for him, his faith, or his art.

Partly this is a matter of the very qualities of style which make Martin so amenable and so accessible a writer: his equability, equanimity, equity. These virtues can, and sometimes do, slide into their adjacent vice: blandness. Then the texture of the writing loosens: far, far too often something is "surely" so (meaning that no one can be sure of it but); and there is the reiterated evasive "almost," often with a robust but eviscerated sequel ("almost instinctively," "almost hallucinatory"), and often doubled up ("almost as if," "seems almost to"). A biographer may need to choose, too, between three such different ways of putting things as: "he might be described as having a retroactive umbilical cord," "Liverpool was to lay a great hairy paw in the middle of that romantic illusion," and "in that remark is encapsulated all the openness . . ."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But these are local demurrals, and there are two broader ones. First, you would not divine from the tone of this book, as against its concessive announcements, how very extreme, bizarre, rebarbative even, Hopkins is as a poet, or feel from this amiable encompassing of his art that there could ever really have been any justified incomprehension of, or principled hostility to, his whole policy and proceedings. It is not that Martin should have included more literary criticism of his own—his talents lie mostly elsewhere, though he does give, for instance, an enlightening account of why Hopkins affects the dangling participle. But any full account of Hopkins's life in relation to his art needs to realize, to make real to us, the facts of—and the implications of—that critical tradition of resistance to Hopkins which has brought into unusual concurrence such superb poet-critics as A. E. Housman, T. S. Eliot, Yvor Winters, and Donald Davie, all insisting on the sheer price that Hopkins paid for the solitude of his powers and the intransigence of his innovations. Davie may be judged to be impatient in his moral and political scoldings of Hopkins's muscle-bound monstrosity, but some such impatience has been felt by many independent (in both senses) readers of Hopkins. The name of Housman is not to be found in this life of Hopkins, and yet it is Housman's sense of things (like his art) which constitutes one unignorable, albeit not unanswerable, critique of Hopkins. (Housman, or earlier, Christina Rossetti, of whom Hopkins once said: "The simple beauty of her work cannot be matched.")

Housman acknowledged receipt of the poems in a cant-free letter to Bridges in 1918:

> I value the book as your gift, and also for some good condensed lines and an engaging attitude of mind which now and again shines through. But the faults which you fairly and judicially set forth thrust themselves more upon my notice; and also another. Sprung Rhythm, as he calls it in his sober and sensitive preface, is just as easy to write as other forms of verse; and many a humble scribbler of words for music-hall songs has written it well. But he does not: he does not make it audible; he puts light syllables in the stress and heavy syllables in the slack, and has to be helped out with typographical signs explaining that things are to be understood as being what in fact they are not. Also the English language is a thing I respect very much, and I resent even the violence Keats did to it; and here is a lesser than Keats doing much more. Moreover his early poems are the promise of something better, if less original; and originality is not nearly so good as goodness, even when it is good. His manner strikes me as deliberately adopted to compensate by strangeness for the lack of pure merit, like the manner which Carlyle took up after he was thirty.

There is something too easy about such current acceptance of Hopkins as supposes that Housman here says nothing which deserves the compliment of rational opposition. Anthony Burgess was not merely being flippant about "The Windhover" when in his novel *The Doctor Is Sick* his hero peeringly blinks his eyes at the magazines in the seedy shop-window:

> There was the one Charlie had brought him: *Brute Beauty.* And there were others he had never seen before: *Valour*; *Act*; *Oh!* He rubbed his eyes, which were troubling him with an odd impairment of vision. Were those really *Air*, *Pride*, *Plume*, *Here*?

Hopkins warned a friend against "doing what I once thought I could do, *adopt an enlightened Christianity.*" Insofar as a biographer of Hopkins is necessarily a critic of the poetry, he may need to be warned against adopting an enlightened Hopkinsianity.

The radical question about this honorably unradical biography is that of its engagement with Hopkins's unenlightened Christianity, his beliefs, his sensibility, his allegiances, even his violences and superstitions. And here Martin falls short, or at any rate stops short. I don't know whether Martin has religious beliefs; I do know that I don't. I don't know whether there would have been imaginative ways in which Martin could have made good his enlightened pluralistic good-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nature in the face of Hopkins's passion and partisanship; I do know that for me the book dithers and hedges.

> Looking back at the events from 1866 from a century and a quarter later, we can easily see that more than religion was at the heart of the conflict between Hopkins and his family, and that it was as much concerned with independence and revolt, with the age-old struggle between father and son, even with the choice between blood father and spiritual father, as with the choice of a particular Church. Because the true conflict was never stated, the overt terms in which the contest was conducted were far more bitter than the immediate situation warranted.

But the pressure within "more than religion" (as if "independence and revolt" were not themselves viewable under a religious aspect), and then the hardening of this to equipollence ("*as much* concerned with . . ."), and then the further intensifying of it to "*the true* conflict" (leaving the religious commitment as in some way false): these impel, not what Martin wishes to claim (alternative descriptions of the same phenomena), but a slighting of the religious in favor of the psychological.

Martin's dealings here are not altogether straight: "we are *forced* to conclude that his unconscious drives *may have been* as powerful . . ." (my italics again). The insistence that Hopkins had leapt "an enormous barrier, one as much concerned with growth and maturation as with religion," not only is insufficiently respectful of Hopkins's sense of the matter, and not only sets "growth and maturation" against "religion" (where a believer would duly urge that it is only a true religious decision which can bring about growth and maturation), but it also gives a misleading sense of what Martin actually enforces. *As much* is not what he most believes. You can hear his secularizing psychologizing bent (I share it, but that doesn't lessen the problem it raises for him as a biographer of so entirely religious a figure) in such phrasing as this: "what strikes a modern reader is how often his spiritual inclinations fitted his psychological needs," where "inclinations" is not justly poised against "needs."

Martin says the liberal thing:

> Hopkins's perceptions of his motivations are frequently startling, combining as they do an initial attribution to religious reasons, then a subsequent shrewd awareness that they also spring out of the predispositions of his own personality. The two views of the matter are not in conflict, simply phenomena discussed in differing vocabulary but with similar patterns.

Shrewd, eh? *Simply*, eh? But what is bound to precipitate "conflict" is any allocation of priority, of what is pre-, to the one and not the other. The effect is persistently of unsettling this equable *also* (a matter merely of "differing vocabulary") with an implacably psychologizing predisposition. "As he did so often, he was claiming religious sanctions for necessities imposed upon him by his own personality, but his confusion of the two was far from being hypocritical, since it was completely unconscious." This is itself an imposition.

So in the end the biography achieves neither an ecumenical accommodation nor a skeptical reservation, but a tacit favoritism. Hopkins, who was very harsh, might retort upon his friendly biographer what he wrote angrily to his friend Bridges, on religious and doctrinal dedication:

> It is long since such things had any significance for you. But what is strange and unpleasant is that you sometimes speak as if they had in reality none for me.

Love letter to a language

Jacques Barzun An Essay on French Verse—For Readers of English Poetry. New Directions, 143 pages, $22.95; $11.95 paper

reviewed by William Jay Smith

On the French ship on which I served as liaison officer during World War II the offi-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cers in the wardroom would sometimes after dinner take to reciting poetry. "Rodrigue, as-tu du coeur?" one would call out, and immediately the answer would come (if memory serves) from his companion, "Non, mais j'ai du carreau," thus turning Corneille's famous lines in *Le Cid* into a card game (Roderick, have you hearts? No, but I have diamonds). The men were summoning up their school days and ridiculing the alexandrines that had been drilled into them in the classroom. I sensed that beneath their absurd declamation there was real affection, for one only makes fun of what one loves. By toying with poetry, which is the essence of language, they were concerning themselves with their own means of articulation, with words that in the deepest sense give meaning to life.

Reading this essay on French verse, I thought at times of that shipboard scene and of its enactment of classical drama, for Jacques Barzun sets out to answer the ridicule that French poetry has often met with from English readers. His answer amounts to a love letter to the French language, a letter reasoned and balanced, simple and direct (those terms that have characterized all Professor Barzun's writing), but understanding and passionate, a letter the intensity of which, with careful, considerate, but thorough persuasion, he invites his English reader to share. For him a poet is "the voice of the language grown conscious of itself . . . He sings, and regardless of who repeats his song, we catch its harmony." It is this one voice, modulating over the centuries, that he follows, examines, and explains in these carefully documented pages.

Now most English readers, thanks to T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and their followers, know and appreciate the work of modern French poets. "Today, 'French poetry' is no longer a self-contradictory phrase, and sheer surprise greets the fact that its existence was ever in doubt," Professor Barzun begins. "But even here confusion persists, for a silent proviso is attached to the modern opinion: . . . no French poetry before Baudelaire. Villon four hundred years earlier, qualifies by exception—he and Baudelaire share a modern mood and Villon's traditional technique is no bar to appreciation. But between these two poles, the void."

To understand why such a void should exist on the part of the English reader and why that reader should have devalued French poetry for over two hundred years, Professor Barzun examines the nature of the language on which that poetry is built. He recalls the blunt question that A. E. Housman put to André Gide at the University of Cambridge in 1917: "How is it that every nation has produced poetry except France?" Gide does not tell us what his answer was at the time but says that he later thought that he should have answered by matching question for question and asking "What is poetry?" since poetry is not a constant but a variable, changing with time and place and with individual or group sensibility. Since everyone agrees that poetry is untranslatable, Professor Barzun chooses to define it by indirection, by analyzing the obstacles to translation, which are "compression, strangeness fused with the natural, and the spell variously put on the ear," the elements that perhaps Milton had in mind when he defined poetry as "simple, sensuous, and passionate."

It is these elements that the great nineteenth-century denigrators—De Quincey, Walter Savage Landor, Matthew Arnold—found lacking in French poetry. The charges leveled at it may be summed up thus: "an endless series of twelve-syllable lines riming feebly; a preference for abstractions occasionally rising into a *tirade*, which at best is oratory, not poetry; an invariably moral or social subject-matter—not a bird or flower in a thousand lines—all this is but mannered prose etiolated by needlessly arbitrary rules of versification. The heavily Latinized vocabulary lacks immediacy and evocative power, and being sounded without accent yields no rhythm. As there is but one meter, thought and feeling are encased in virtually standardized propositions." Professor Barzun sets out to prove that most of these charges are

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kind of Love

Selected and New Poems
Dick Davis

"The style is firm, totally without pretension, but all art. The majority of poems are metrical: at a time when most American poets consider metre obsolete and most English poets who use it do so as if it were obsolete, it is wonderful to find a poet (English) whose poetry lives through its metre. His handling of it is masterful, and you are never aware of effort. And the language is exact but relentless, like the perceptions."

—Thom Gunn

$19.95 *cloth*, $10.95 *paper*

issing Measures

Modern Poetry and the Revolt against Meter
Timothy Steele

"Certain to provoke controversy, Steele's arguments strike me as so forceful, so well thought through, that anyone who assails them will find the going difficult."

—X. J. Kennedy

$22.95 *cloth*, $12.95 *paper*

Available at fine bookstores or direct from

ARKANSAS

The University of Arkansas Press 1–800–525–1823

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

based on a misunderstanding of the nature of the French language.

No two languages are closer and yet farther apart than English and French, close in their mixed history and mutual borrowings, far apart in grammar and idiom and even farther apart in the turn of thought and in the way the sounds that seem the same are pronounced. "French is a vowel language; that is the great principle to remember," and this is the principle to which Professor Barzun returns again and again. French vowels moreover are, as Paul Valéry said, "numerous and distinctly shaded (*très nuancées*)." In English it is the consonants that matter and in some long words only one vowel out of several is heard. In French every vowel must be clearly pronounced. In English there is a definite stress on some part of each word. French has no real stress, only a slightly rising tone, and this lack of accentuation makes it unique among European languages. In this respect, it resembles Algonquin, which after the American War of Independence was proposed in New York as a national language to replace English. (It is curious that Professor Barzun does not mention that, in its lack of accentuation, French seems close to Japanese. I remember being told in Tokyo how baffled taxi drivers could be when American or English tourists asked for the Okura Hotel, heavily stressing the second syllable and completely transforming the word, whereas in Japanese all three vowel sounds are evenly stressed. It is because of the similarity of Japanese to French that apparently Japanese poets have produced such close approximations of Verlaine's famous lyrics.) French is not a logical language, as foreigners have frequently assumed, but it is "implacably analytic," and, if not clearer than other languages, one that "shows up lack of clarity at once and painfully." It is indeed this basic lack of ambiguity that has made it seem to many English critics a lesser vessel for poetry than English.

Those critics have usually insisted that the French poets of all periods have been wedded to the alexandrine, that measure, as Landor put it, with its break "down the back like broiled mackerel." But Professor Barzun points out that even at the height of the Neoclassical era, when the alexandrine predominated, there were lyricists and satirists who used traditional lines of six, eight, or ten syllables. He traces the alexandrine from its first deliberate use in the thirteenth century down to the sixteenth century when Ronsard, a master of all forms of poetry, remolded it for his longer works, then to the seventeenth century when the language was codified and the measure acquired its strictest rules: "Ronsard was free; Racine was hemmed in." But even Racine, with what Robert Lowell calls his "diamond edge," bent the rules and achieved harmony in his own way. Molière and La Fontaine each perfected a conversational style that made for great poetry. The poet who was to match Ronsard in his revolutionary role three hundred years later, even surpassing it in variety and influence, was Victor Hugo. In 1830, when the staging of his *Hernani* occasioned an almost physical battle in the audience, the Neoclassical system, which had endured since 1640, came to an end.

In this historical survey, Professor Barzun sets down memorable thumbnail descriptions of individual poets. In La Fontaine, for example, "art is concentration." Of Hugo it is plain that he "thought in images and that the often overwhelming, suffocating power of his poems is due to this gift of seeing: image succeeds image to re-present the initial experience or idea." Of Musset he writes: "If Hugo's verse feels as if wrought on the forge, Musset's is liquid metal cast in a mold." The Surrealists and other modern critics have considered Verlaine an "elegant trifler," at best a minor figure: "This unfair estimate is due to a hidden tendency in modern judgments of poetry—indeed of art in general: Verlaine offers no emphatic message. . . . [A]s more recent poets have bewailed the daily round and disgustedly surveyed the wasteland, they have turned to the colloquial for masochistic, denunciatory verisimilitude, a style that excludes 'music' such

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

as Verlaine wrought." When poets like Mallarmé, Laforgue, Claudel, and St.-John Perse turned their attention to English, the result was a lingual exchange of the sort that had not occurred for five hundred years: "Contact with another idiom marked a departure from the parochialism and chauvinism of French poets about their own tongue and incited them—or at least made it easy for them—to violate usage and syntax when seeking new effects."

Harmony in versification is difficult to define and assess, and Professor Barzun shows how it is rooted in human speech and varies from poet to poet and from period to period. He insists that Pope is wrong in thinking that the sound and rhythm of words should echo the sense; they simply supply the sense in an attractive fashion. In this connection, I find his argument that onomatopoeia is a complete fiction not entirely convincing. As proof of its illusory character he tells of a Japanese friend, with whom he frequently discussed literature, who told him once that for him and some of his English-speaking friends the most beautiful word in our language was "cellardoor." The word, he decided, had a special appeal to his friend perhaps because he found the *l* and *r* sounds difficult to pronounce and because he had never actually seen a cellar door. To the English ear the word has no charm whatever; because of its meaning it is prosaic. "Compare with it 'celandine,'" Professor Barzun says, "where the image of the flower at once makes the sound lovely." Here I must part company with him. Regardless of its meaning, to my ear "cellardoor," with the pleasant shift of its vowels, is far more attractive as pure sound than "celandine," whatever lovely image the latter may evoke.

To a poet often the sound, not just in nonsense verse, precedes the sense. Perhaps that is why Verlaine wanted music before anything else, and why T. S. Eliot said that sometimes he had the rhythm of a passage before he had the actual words. To a child mastering the language, sound comes before meaning, and the same is true in much primitive poetry. In the early English riddles the interest is frequently in the sound of the words and the sensations they call forth rather than in the answer, the logical meaning. I think that I know the meaning of Wallace Stevens's memorable lines:

> There are no bears among the roses
> Only a negress who supposes
> Things false and wrong
>
> About the lantern of the beauty
> Who walks there, as a farewell duty,
> Walks long and long . . .

even though they seem intentionally vague, as are T. S. Eliot's:

> Garlic and sapphires in the mud
> Clot the bedded axle-tree . . .

but in both instances the sound not only serves or echoes the meaning; it *is* the meaning. And the same is true in Racine's line, describing the appearance of the Furies during Orestes' hallucination:

> Pour qui sont ces serpents qui sifflent sur
> vos têtes?
>
> (Whom are these serpents for that whistle
> atop your heads?)

"This much-praised line states quite rightly that the serpents whistle. But onomatopoeia is supposedly achieved by means of the five *s*'s. Now," Professor Barzun asks, "did the snakes hiss or whistle?" And he answers: "According to convention either will do; but it *is* a convention, and one that holds good only when the meaning gives it support." Letters and sounds are indeed infinitely malleable. Racine elsewhere uses the *s* to express tender solicitude but here at a key point, master of sound that he is, he achieves a "hiss of hate" that makes his reader—in this case, his listener—forget the literal meaning of "whistle." The sound in this line *becomes* the meaning. As is shown many

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

times in this essay, great poets break the rules when they choose and turn convention to their purpose. They give priority to sound when it is in their best interest to do so.

Among the benefits along the way in this study are the accurate observations on the nature of both French and English and the brilliance of the running translations given at the bottom of each page of the many French examples provided. As an illustration of padding (the *cheville*), Professor Barzun gives us Boileau's line:

> Pégase s'effarouche et recule en arriere

which he renders:

> Pegasus takes umbrage and goes backward backwards

He notes that Hugo's title *Les Châtiments*, the poems attacking Napoleon III, is literally in English "Chastisements" but would be better translated as "Whips and Scorpions." He points out that many titles, which are "half-grown metaphors," are untranslatable. *A la recherche du temps perdu* cannot be rendered by "in search of lost time," as current translators are doing, nor can *Un homme se penche sur son passé* be rendered as "a man leaning over his past." The word "spleen," which conveys the "unrelieved Baudelairian experience," he defines thus: "Its connotation in French is depression; it is not tender like melancholy, nor does it carry the idea of resentment as does English 'spleen.' The soul is weary; every small accident underscores the hopeless, meaningless, and unchangeable character of human life; whence the horror of it."

There have been other treatises on French versification for the English reader but none has been so thorough, so well reasoned, so free of academic jargon, and so available as this one. Because he presents and defends his great subject with such clarity, precision, and passion, Jacques Barzun has produced an absolute masterpiece. I envy the student and young lover of poetry who can take it up today and ingest the wisdom that it provides. I wish that I had had it when I went to study in France over half a century ago; it would have answered many of the questions that troubled me and for which I had to find answers myself.

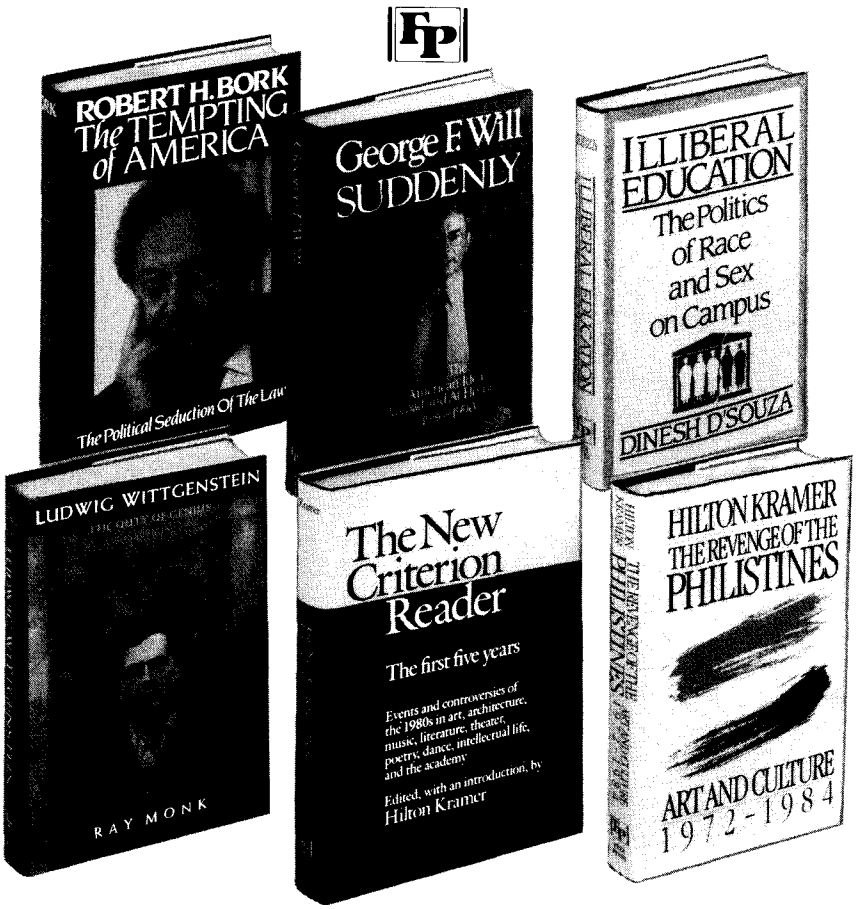
It is amazing that Professor Barzun, now in his eighties, should have produced so youthful and vigorous a book, an objective study that is at the same time so personal a document. He recalls the accent with which one of his professors, a native of Provence, read Leconte de Lisle in the classroom, and how his great-grandmother, born in 1830, pronounced certain words as they had been pronounced in the early 1800s. He looks back on the time when Guillaume Apollinaire held him on his lap and told him how he planned to alter the meaning of certain words and thus to create a new language. He concludes his essay with his own translation of "Les Djinns" (Evil Spirits) by Victor Hugo, which he published under a pseudonym while an undergraduate at Columbia. In it he skillfully approximates the varied line lengths and the rhyme scheme of the original. Here are the two concluding stanzas:

> Vague sounds more—
> Slumbering, or
> Like the wave
> Washed ashore,
> Or the plaint
> Soft and faint
> Of a saint
> On a grave.
>
> At night
> Disquiet . . .
> But dread
> Has fled—
> No trace,
> For space
> Has drowned
> All sound.

Such personal testimony enlivens and enriches the historical treatment throughout.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Congratulations to THE NEW CRITERION on 10 years of distinguished cultural criticism from THE FREE PRESS


ROBERT H. BORK
The TEMPTING of AMERICA
The Political Seduction Of The Law
George F. Will
SUDDENLY
ILLIBERAL EDUCATION
The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus
DINESH D'SOUZA
LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN
RAY MONK
The New Criterion Reader
The first five years
Events and controversies of the 1980s in art, architecture, music, literature, theater, poetry, dance, intellectual life, and the academy
Edited, with an introduction, by Hilton Kramer
HILTON KRAMER
THE REVENGE OF THE PHILISTINES
ART AND CULTURE
1972-1984

THE FREE PRESS • A Division of Macmillan, Inc.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The voice of sanity

Václav Havel Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990. Selected and edited by Paul Wilson. Knopf, 415 pages, $22

reviewed by Stanislaw Baranczak

Let's imagine that a friend of ours, a book designer, calls us to ask for help. He has only just begun to work on a design for a book on the history of Eastern and Central European culture under Communism. For the book's front and back covers, he needs a pair of really striking archival shots, two haunting images that would bracket, by their mutual contrast, twentieth-century culture's most demanding test and probably crucial experience, the seventy-odd-year-long story of Communist rule over that part of Europe. Could we suggest something?

As far as I'm concerned, for such a pair of visual brackets I would definitely recommend not the worn-out pictures of the salvo of the cruiser *Aurora* and the tearing down of the Berlin Wall but something much less expected: two photographs, each showing a writer who had accepted an important position within his country's structure of power, and each capturing the moment when such a writer-turned-politician experienced the most enlightening confrontation of his ideas and dreams with the opinions and wishes of the people of his country.

The reader has probably made a guess by now that for the bracket nearer to us in time I would choose the well-known image of Václav Havel waving to enthusiastic crowds from the balcony of the Prague palace. Wrong. Havel himself is an obvious choice, but my lens catches him at another place and time. More than a year after he is elected president of Czechoslovakia, he has just traveled all the way from Prague to Bratislava. Here, in an open city square, he listens to local politicians' fiery speeches demanding Slovakia's immediate separation from Bohemia. He takes the floor with the intent of saying something conciliatory, but, just as he opens his mouth, he is pelted with a good many unfriendly looking objects and is physically attacked. His aides barely manage to push him into a waiting limousine and drive away.

As to the other picture, it would have captured an event which had happened more than sixty years earlier. Frankly, I do not even know whether a photograph of the incident has ever existed; most probably not. Our friend the designer would, then, have to do with a drawing based on the detailed account included in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*. This story features the writer Maxim Gorky at the height of his officially inflated fame, as well as of his political power, as Stalin's deputy in charge of Soviet literary life; he is on his fact-finding trip, in 1929, to Solovki, a labor camp located on the far-north islands. This was a prototype of the Siberian network of labor camps, the proliferation of which was to reach its peak later. As such, Solovki was not yet as murderous as those, but it was harsh enough for an inmate to be able to die because of malnutrition, exposure, overexertion, insufficient medical care, a knife from a fellow prisoner, or a bullet from the barrel of a guard's *vintovka*, not to mention the use of torture by the camp staff.

Now what gives this story a slightly sentimental twist is that the Solovki camp housed a large number of minors, mostly representing the swelling ranks of *bezprizornye*, homeless children and adolescents, usually orphans, who had turned to crime to survive. And Gorky had a soft spot for such kids. He used to write with a lot of gusto about their way of life, which he idealized and romanticized for literary purposes. He therefore made a special request to visit young inmates' quarters and he even went so far as to ask the boys whether they had any complaints.

Unexpectedly (insofar as the conversation took place in the presence of some camp authorities), one boy said he did. Gorky demanded that the two of them be left alone. He spent a whole hour listening to what the kid had to say. A touching detail:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CHICAGO
A CENTURY OF FINE PUBLISHING

1891-1991

Kurt Wolff
A Portrait in Essays and Letters
Edited by Michael Ermarth

"Kurt Wolff was one of this century's great publishers. This skillfully compiled book shows how he worked and what he felt. . . . It is a fascinating portrait of what publishing was – and should be." – André Schiffrin

Cloth $24.95 252 pages

Isaiah Berlin
A Celebration
Edited by Edna Ullmann-Margalit *and* Avishai Margalit

These essays celebrate one of the most eminent philosophers of our time. Contributors include Alfred Brendel, Joseph Brodsky, Ronald Dworkin, Stuart Hampshire, Stephen Spender, Charles Taylor, Bernard Williams, and Richard Wolheim.

"One of the many merits of this rich and rewarding collection is the sense it transmits of the tone of Berlin's writings and conversation, of the multiplicity of his interests and the variety of his achievements." – John Gray, *Times Literary Supplement*

Cloth $27.50 225 pages

The Noble Savage
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1754-1762
Maurice Cranston

"Anyone curious about the paradoxes of a most paradoxical man will not go wrong by starting with this invaluable biography." – James Miller, *The Washington Post Book World*

"[*The Noble Savage*] is every bit as fair-minded, as thorough and as elegantly written as the first *Jean-Jacques*. Once the biography is complete we have Rousseau whole, and have him plain." – John Sturrock, *New York Times Book Review*

Cloth $32.50 416 pages Illus.

And in Paper –

Jean-Jacques
The Early Life and Work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1712-1754
Maurice Cranston

"Exceptionally fresh. . . . [Cranston] makes the first part of Rousseau's life as absorbing as a picaresque novel. His fidelity to Rousseau's ideas and to his life as it was lives is a triumph of poise." – Naomi Bliven, *The New Yorker*

"The definitive biography, as scholarly as it is entertaining." – *The Economist*

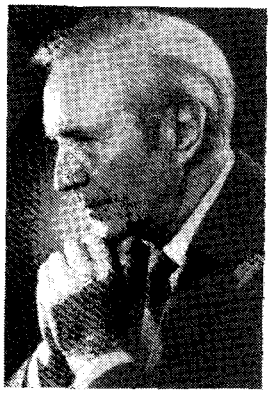
Paper $17.95 382 pages Illus.

Real Presences
George Steiner

"Proof anew that Steiner must be the last of what a more civilized age called 'men of letters.'" – Ron Grossman, *Chicago Tribune*

"A new book by George Steiner is always an event." – Eva Hoffman, *New York Times.*

Now in Paper $11.95 246 pages



Begin Here
The Forgotten Conditions of Teaching and Learning
Jacques Barzun

"It is difficult to imagine a more pungent, perceptive, or eloquent commentary on contemporary American education." – Jonathan Yardley, *Washington Post Book World*

"In these essays, we are reminded of how much we have come to depend on Jacques Barzun as the conscience of American education." – Diane Ravitch

Cloth $24.95 234 pages

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

At bookstores, or call:
1-800-621-2736.
In Illinois: 312-568-1550

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

when he left the cell, tears were reportedly streaming down his cheeks.

Then he left for Moscow, carrying his tear-inducing knowledge in his brain. What he eventually did with it, nobody knows. One fact is known, though: as soon as he was out of the Solovki camp, the boy was silenced forever by a firing squad.

Putting these two stories alongside each other may seem a rather grotesque thing to do. What's the use trying to prove, as if there could be any doubt, that Václav Havel is, as a human being, of a different mold than Stalin's henchmen? That he has always viewed literature's and the writer's roles in society somewhat differently than did Gorky (who, let us not forget, has been credited with inventing the term Socialist Realism and penned the famous definition of the writer as "the engineer of human souls")? And that Czechoslovakia after 1989 with Havel as its president is a different sort of country than the Soviet Union in 1929 with Gorky as its official cult figure?

And yet I would insist that this Gorky versus Havel match would illustrate something more relevant. Commonplaces aside, it would speak volumes on the issue that we, in the present-day world, are forced to reflect on with increasing frequency: the issue of—let's put it thus for the sake of brevity—the creative imagination versus political power or, even shorter, imagination *in* power.

Not so long ago, a rather extreme opinion on this matter was voiced by Joseph Brodsky in his much-debated Nobel speech. Provocatively to be sure, and with his tongue in his cheek, too, but with a lot of genuine-sounding conviction, Brodsky argued that, since what modern politics lacks most of all is the spirit of humanity, political leaders should be much better trained in literary matters than they apparently are, and, when push comes to shove, perhaps should be cross-examined by their voters or the media to check their familiarity with classical works of world literature. Even Brodsky's detractors, who called his proposal hopelessly naïve, had to admit soon afterward that the Russian-born American poet may have been on to something: not that professional politicians suddenly started devouring Dickens and Dostoevsky but, rather, that different cases of professional writers becoming professional politicians started popping up all over the world. At least with the election of two writer-presidents to head the new democracies of Central Europe (Czechoslovakia and Hungary) and the lost-but-impressive presidential campaign of Mario Vargas Llosa in Peru, something of a trend had begun to emerge.

In today's Central Europe, even a countertrend has already managed to form, whose popular support may serve as a negative indicator of how far things have gone in terms of employing literary scribblers as presidents. I have in mind, I'm sorry to say, my native Poland, in whose recent presidential election campaign it was enough to use the word "eggheads" every fifteen minutes to secure victory for oneself. And in Czechoslovakia, of course, it is entirely imaginable, if not indeed probable, that Havel will lose his next presidential bid. If this happens, it may simply mean one—or both—of two things: (1) that the people of Czechoslovakia are not satisfied with their president's performance, or (2) that they opted so overwhelmingly for Havel during and after the "Velvet Revolution" because they badly needed not so much an efficient president as an unequivocal and undisputed symbol of their nation's sudden moral awakening after decades of apathy under totalitarian rule.

Without speculating as to what extent the latter of these two things might have been at work—that is, to what extent Havel owed his suddenly discovered popularity in the fall of 1989 to the bad consciences of most of his compatriots—let us just say this: all other things considered, the fact that he *could* successfully serve as such an unequivocal and undisputed symbol is largely due to himself, his authentically heroic past, and his ability to put history-making political concepts into precise and stirring words. There is no better

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

way to come to this conclusion than by reading his *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990*, selected and edited with exceptional skill and care by Paul Wilson, Havel's longtime translator and an expert in his work. (It is Wilson to whom we owe, among many other things, the brilliant English version of Havel's letters to his wife.) Alongside *Letters to Olga* and the more recently published interview/autobiographical confession *Disturbing the Peace*, both also issued by Knopf, this collection of essays, articles, speeches, letters, and reflective notes forms, as it were, the third part of a triptych whose careful scrutiny has been finally made possible for Havel's English-speaking students and fans. (Before that, only six of his most important essays, including the renowned "Power of the Powerless" and "Letter to Dr. Gustav Husák," were available in book form, as part of the volume *Václav Havel or Living in Truth*, edited by Jan Vladislav; *Open Letters* effectively supersedes that useful but dated collection, put out by Faber & Faber five years ago, by providing the reader not only with a generous sample of Havel's early writings but with the latest prose, up to a piece written in January 1990 and representing a genre he most certainly had never tried before—the New Year's presidential radio address.)

In fact, within this triptych of comparably engaging and essential books *Open Letters* is destined to serve as the centerpiece from now on. Without detracting anything from the philosophical depth and quietly heroic fortitude of *Letters to Olga* on the one hand, and the fascinating autobiographical stuff to be found in *Disturbing the Peace* on the other, this collection combines glimpses of both Havel the philosopher and Havel the activist with a full-size image of Havel the moral/political thinker. I'm using the adjective-slash-adjective epithet only because a compound one, say "ethico-political," which almost made its way into my previous sentence, would look too fanciful and strange to our eyes. It would look strange because the thing it denotes does not seem to exist on earth—not anymore, as a conservatively minded person would add, or not yet, as someone putting his hopes on the future would prefer to say. The very juxtaposition of morality and politics sounds definitely oxymoronic; morality and political resistance, yes, but can there possibly be any notion of ethics involved in our disputing politics being made by politicians rather than dissidents? Isn't all politics, in fact, *Realpolitik*? Isn't the politician a professional whose skill is measured by his ability to defend this or another group's interests rather than any principles of his own, and to strike compromises rather than remain faithful to his once-stated position?

It would seem to a reasonable person that it is so; and yet Havel does not much care for the label of "a reasonable person," if reasonableness means in fact our cynicism born out of helplessness and unwillingness to take a risk. He does more than just juxtapose "morality" and "politics"—he mingles these two; he does not just suggest the admission of ethics into the vicinity of politics—he proposes to measure politics with an ethical yardstick. His 1990 New Year's address, not the first of his statements addressed to his entire nation but the first ever pronounced by him from a position of power, remains as crystal-clear in that respect as any of his earlier dissident exhortations:

> Masaryk based his politics on morality. Let us try in a new time and in a new way to restore this concept of politics. Let us teach ourselves and others that politics should be an expression of a desire to contribute to the happiness of the community rather than of a need to cheat or rape the community. Let us teach ourselves and others that politics can be not only the art of the possible, especially if this means the art of speculation, calculation, intrigue, secret deals, and pragmatic maneuvering, but that it can even be the art of the impossible, namely, the art of improving ourselves and the world.

"He sounds," Havel's cynical fellow citizen might comment at this point, while watching TV with his wife and kids on New Year's holiday last year, "like he doesn't

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

know what the real world is like." Exactly the same opinion might have been uttered by the same cynical fellow a few years earlier, had he then by accident heard (on Radio Free Europe waves, presumably) a fragment of one of Havel's penetrating and brilliantly argued analyses of Czechoslovakia's totalitarian stagnation, say "The Power of the Powerless" or "Politics and Conscience" (also included in *Open Letters*). The very titles of these earlier pieces indicate that the cynic would be right at least in one sense: in stating that Havel is still the same old Havel. In everything else, the cynic would be wrong. Havel does know what the real world is like: there are few people even in today's Central Europe who could claim to have a larger or more diversified experience of "real" and indeed quite harsh life, from growing up a social outcast (his father having been branded a former "capitalist," young Havel was effectively barred from obtaining any formal education), to being slandered, harassed, and persecuted in a variety of ways by the agents of the totalitarian state, to doing time in several prisons and one labor camp. He is, in other words, no naïve idealist who believes that his good intentions will be reciprocated by friendly treatment from his enemies, if not immediately rewarded by equally good intentions of their own. He fully realizes that, in dealing with cheaters and sadists, such opponents are much more likely to take advantage of you than surprise you with any glimmer of altruism and good will.

And yet Havel the dissident was always bent on behaving as a normal human being should—"normal" meaning one endowed with the strange inner voice we call conscience. He always wrote *as if* censorship never existed; he always sent appeals to courts *as if* justice were something the Czechoslovakian courts could be even remotely interested in; he always spoke his mind *as if* the thought police were not holding his entire country in an iron grip, making even the act of reading certain books, or expressing opinions in private letters, punishable. Most importantly, he did all that as, first, a direct consequence of his own and others' humanity (in a double sense: as a result of obeying the dictates of conscience, and as a result of being granted, after all, basic human rights), and, second, as a direct consequence of his, ironically, common-sense and pragmatic approach to life.

This sounds almost too paradoxical, but in fact this common-sense and pragmatic quality is precisely what made Havel's first full-scale formulations of his ethicopolitical program both so penetrating and so invigorating. (Based on my own memory, I would say that there was no single dissident document circulating in Central Europe in the Seventies, except perhaps Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag*, that could have been credited with so much dramatic impact on people's minds as Havel's letter to Husák or "The Power of the Powerless.") They were penetrating because they opened people's eyes to the chief deficiency of the Communist system: the fact that the rulers hold sway over the ruled by promising them a basic minimum of well-being and safety in exchange for a basic minimum of political obedience, and yet in reality always demand *total* obedience even though they never deliver *even that minimum* of well-being and safety they have promised.

And Havel's formulations were also invigorating because they suggested an almost unbelievably simple method for the ruled to retaliate and perhaps even retrieve what they had been robbed of as a result of this crooked deal. Since obedience in a Communist system means, first and foremost, agreeing to participate in the ubiquitous lying without which the system would not survive a week, let's do the obvious thing. Let's stop lying. Let's *live in truth*. Let's call a spade a spade, a crime a crime, a stupid idea a stupid idea. If we start doing so in sufficiently large numbers, we'll see—maybe the system will indeed need no more than a week to collapse. But—and this was the most seminal of Havel's revelatory thoughts—waiting for the masses to make a collective move is fruitless because things never hap-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Harvard Congratulates New Criterion On Its Tenth Anniversary

CHARLES SHEELER AND THE CULT OF THE MACHINE
Karen Lucic
Charles Sheeler (1886-1965), one of the most noted American painters and photographers to embrace the iconography of the machine has been hailed as both high priest and heretic of the machine age. Through close investigation of both his social and his aesthetic concerns, Lucic reinterprets the work of this important modernist.
20 color illus., 50 halftones $34.95 cloth

MICHEL FOUCAULT
Didier Eribon
Translated by Betsy Wing
In this biography of the brilliant French intellectual, Didier Eribon provides a fascinating and meticulously documented narrative that debunks the many myths and rumors surrounding Foucault. As a journalist well acquainted with him for years before his death, Eribon was particularly well placed to conduct the dozens of interviews which form the cornerstone of this enlightening profile.
31 halftones/$27.95 cloth

BACH
Essays on His Life and Music
Christoph Wolff
In this distinguished collection of essays, Christoph Wolff offers new perspectives on Bach's life and music. He demonstrates important influences on Bach's artistic development and develops fresh insight into his work habits, compositional intent, and the musical traditions that shaped his thought.
$45.00 cloth, 102 musical examples

Harvard University Press
Cambridge, MA 02138 (617) 495-2480

pen that way. Great numbers start from the number one. It is the individual who makes the first move, who is the first to stop lying. *Why not you?* Others will follow sooner or later. Why? Because your example will show them that *living in truth is actually much simpler than living by constant lying.* It makes you feel better. It makes you feel what you really are: a free human being.

Havel's argument is as simple as it sounds, yet it is one of those few messages resounding through the centuries which owe their history-making power precisely to the simplicity of the idea they contain. Let us not confuse this kind of simplicity with the principle of oversimplification at work in any of the totalitarian ideologies of our century, from Nazism to Communism. Their growth—and, ultimately, their undoing—came from reducing the complex truth of the human world to the easily graspable, black-and-white antinomy of, whatever the basis of such division, "us" and "them." Havel's political thinking is the exact opposite of this poisonous reduction. What matters for him is, to put it in a shorthand manner, not "us" versus "them," but "I" within "us": such a way of life in which the individual's self-fulfillment could be achieved through contributing to the public weal and, vice versa, the public weal could not but profit by caring for the self-fulfillment of the individual.

In order to make such an arrangement work, "living in truth" must become not only the individual's way of life but, analogously and to the same maximalistic extent, with no "ifs" and "buts," the principle guiding public life from local communities up to international politics. For the individual the simplest way of going through life is the straight line of saying the truth and keeping his word, and there is no reason why it should be otherwise for governments, countries, and political blocs. If this sounds utopian, it only goes to show how far we, as a civilization, have gone in our reverse development from the idea of mature co-responsibility for the world to the infantile pursuit of local and temporary interests.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

To return to my initial dual image of Gorky visiting the Solovki camp and Havel being assaulted by his fellow citizens in Bratislava: needless to say, we may never learn what went through each of the two writers' heads on these two occasions. The two incidents are divided by light years as regards both historical time and political context but they share the same situational core of a writer being, to all appearances, violently shaken by the discrepancy between what he actually saw and the image (in Gorky's case, the image of the happy "new Soviet man," in Havel's, the image of his fellow citizens as basically decent and civilized people) that his imagination had previously established. What the two incidents also share is that after each of them the writer-turned-politician returns home carrying his newly acquired awareness of the discrepancy. What does each do with this new knowledge then?

We can be almost sure that Gorky did nothing with his. We can be more than sure that Havel took some practical steps to alleviate, if not fully resolve, the conflict. The difference lies in the fact that for Gorky the criterion of truth, the ethical yardstick for measuring a political action, never really mattered. He is an example of an imagination in power at its most dangerous, when the creative ego ceases to perceive the facts of the world-as-it-is at all, since they could shatter his cherished image of the world-as-it-should-be. We may safely assume that Gorky's mind simply blocked out the experience of his conversation with the boy prisoner: such things were not supposed to happen, so this particular thing never happened either.

By contrast, we may even more safely assume that for Havel the principle of "living in truth" has remained as valid in his new capacity as politician as it was when his only political prominence lay in his being Czechoslovakia's most persecuted dissident. Even if Havel as a politician fails to resolve this or other conflicts within his country, if he ultimately turns out to be too honest, truthful, and rational-thinking for his own good as president of a modern nation, it will not necessarily mean that his call for "politics based on morality" in today's world is premature. It may only mean that we all need this kind of politics even more desperately than we realize.

Shorter notices

Octavio Paz In Search of the Present: Nobel Lecture, 1990. In Spanish, with an English translation by Anthony Stanton. Harvest/Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 68 pages, $8.95 paper

Octavio Paz, born in Mexico in 1914, is the latest Nobel laureate in literature. A poet, essayist, editor, and diplomat, he has also proved to be, in such works of cultural criticism as *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, the master analyst of the Mexican temper. Foreign readers seeking the essence of Spanish North America, and Mexican readers seeking a sense of their country's relation to the modern world, can have no better guide on their journey than Paz. And there is no better place to begin with Paz than here, in his address last year to the Swedish Academy, for here he speaks not only of Mexico but of himself, and not only of the forces that shaped his world but of those that shaped him as a poet, a *Mexican* poet, a writer bound to the European tradition by the accident of the Spanish language yet separated from it by historical circumstance.

Paz's story is that of the search of a Third World intellectual for the very center of Western culture and for a purchase, however slippery, on the present. ("I wanted to be a modern poet," he writes. "I wanted to belong to my time and to my century.") It is also the story of his return—from New York, London, and Paris—to Mexico City, the place he started out from and the source of what he calls his "antiquity." He returned not only to bring his discoveries in modernism to Mexico but to live out the lesson he had learned from the moderns: "that between tradition and modernity there is a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bridge. When they are mutually isolated, tradition stagnates and modernity vaporizes; when joined, modernity breathes new life into tradition, and tradition responds by providing depth and gravity." His poetic task, he realized, was not only to master the modern style, but to fuse it with his country's pre-Columbian and colonial heritage and the language of his Spanish-speaking forebears—Lope, Quevedo, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. "The search for modernity," writes Paz, "was a return to the origins. . . . Separation now became reconciliation."

It is precisely this great lesson of the moderns, says Paz, that has not been learned by the present generation. Worse still, the majority of our younger artists and critics insist that the lesson can have no meaning for today's world and indeed must be rejected. The bridge between tradition and modernity, which for decades had been rotting due to the negligence of its supposed caretakers, is now being torn up, plank by plank. But "the decline of the idea of modernity," writes Paz, "and the popularity of the dubious notion of 'postmodernism' are phenomena that affect not only literature and the arts. We are experiencing the crisis of the essential ideas and beliefs that have guided mankind for over two centuries." We live in a spiritual wilderness in which our absolutes, "whether they be religious or philosophical, moral or aesthetic, are not collective but private." Will this making private the ideas that once bound mankind together—this dividing of society, so to speak, into sects of one—end in the complete destruction of our common civilization, or even of Man? Perhaps. The best hope for the future, Paz suggests, is for each of us to learn the lesson of modernity for himself, to rebuild the bridge within. This may not forestall what Paz calls "the end of the Modern Age," but it may lead us, or at least enough of us, from a false sense of separation from history to a new philosophy of the present, a present that would embrace the greatness of our past, a present made meaningful by the truth of that greatness.

—*Christopher Carduff*

Peter Davison One of the Dangerous Trades: Essays on the Work and Workings of Poetry. University of Michigan Press, 218 pages, $32.50; $11.95 paper

Peter Davison is that rare individual, a contemporary poet who has spent his entire working life outside of the academy. The sixty-three-year-old Davison has had a long and distinguished career as a trade-book editor, first at Atlantic Monthly Press, where he was director, and more recently at Houghton Mifflin, where he has his own imprint. In addition, Davison has served for many years as poetry editor of *The Atlantic*. Despite such demanding professional obligations, Davison has somehow managed to find time to write nine volumes of verse and an autobiography, as well as a substantial amount of literary journalism, a selection of which now takes its place in Michigan's "Poets on Poetry" series. In these essays, reviews, and memoirs—culled from nearly thirty years of work—Davison is often at his best when considering the pros and cons of having no university affiliation. One must do without, for example, those long summer vacations when one can devote oneself uninterruptedly to writing; one must also do without the small, tightly-knit community of scholars, poets, and students that the academy ideally affords (Davison admits to having no close poet friends) as well as the latest volumes of chic literary theory in the library. (On second thought, this last may be a boon.)

Such liabilities do not, however, outweigh the main blessing of life outside the academy: namely, intellectual autonomy, the freedom to develop and exercise a critical perspective that is as much a product of the real world as it is of academic study. Such independence is evident on every page of *One of the Dangerous Trades*. For example, it is hard to imagine an academic critic, holed up in his library carrel, observing about the poet L. E. Sissman—a late friend of Davison's who in mid-life had been diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease—that "for the rest of his life he wrote like one possessed of a knowl-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

edge remote from most of us, the knowledge of real time." "Real time," after all, is not high on the academic agenda. It is equally hard to imagine a typical academic critic possessing the fresh simplicity to observe that Robert Frost's enduring appeal derived in part from his "instinct . . . always . . . [to] set out for somewhere." Nor does one hear the rustle of academic robes or the creak of the lectern behind Davison's suggestion that poets "must learn to believe again that time is their friend."

Davison's doubts about the academy seem to have come chiefly from Frost, who was something of a mentor to Davison and an old friend of his father, Edward, himself a poet. Frost's own loathing of academic education—he regularly counseled students to drop out—was notorious. In the final essay of *Dangerous Trades*, an amusing and touching memoir, Davison confesses that his years as a student at Harvard and Cambridge were something of a hardship for the poet in him. "[W]hatever other delights I found [at Cambridge]," he writes, "a new understanding of poetry was not among them." In sum, a remark Davison makes about Wallace Stevens applies equally well to himself: "he seemed unable to dedicate himself to the world of the imagination until he first mastered the procedures of the common world."

—*Robert Richman*

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

"Degenerate Art" and German modernism *by Hilton Kramer*
The recovery of Russian literature *by Vasily Rudich*
Pater and Wilde *by Louis Auchincloss*
Brian Friel *by Richard Tillinghast*
Crime and punishment *by Leszek Kolakowski*
The art of Romare Bearden *by Eric Gibson*
The letters of Dorothy Richardson *selected, and with an introduction, by Gloria G. Fromm*
A new look at Augustine's "Confessions" *by C. H. Sisson*
Paul Johnson's "The Birth of the Modern" *by James Bowman*
Jacques Copeau *by Frederick Brown*
The novels of Dawn Powell *by Lauren Weiner*
William Hazlitt *by Joseph Epstein*
The theater of Mikhail Bulgakov *by Donald Lyons*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MAGGI HAMBLING

An Eye Through A Decade
1981 – 1991

6 September – 27 October 1991

YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART
1080 CHAPEL STREET, NEW HAVEN, CT
TELEPHONE 203-432-2800 FACSIMILE 203-432-9695
TUES–SAT 10am–5pm, SUNDAY 12pm–5pm
ADMISSION FREE

Maggi Hambling is represented by

BERNARD JACOBSON GALLERY
14A CLIFFORD STREET LONDON W1X 1RF
TELEPHONE: 071-495-8575 FACSIMILE: 071-495-6210

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dolan/Maxwell

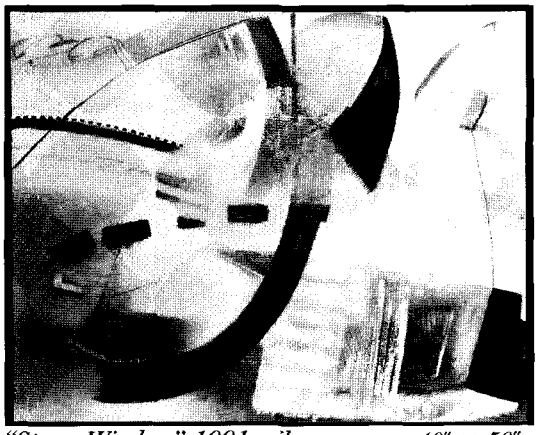
Philadelphia

Distinguished Contemporary and Modern Works on Paper

Norman Ackroyd
Milton Avery
Morris Blackburn
Dean Dass
Carroll Dunham
Mary Beth Edelson
Claes Eklundh
Eric Fischl
Bill Freeland
Sam Gilliam
Anthony-Petr Górny
Stanley William Hayter
Joseph Hecht
David Hockney
Jane Kent
Robert Keyser
Winifred Lutz
Michael Manzavrakos
Mick Moon
Robert Motherwell
Elizabeth Murray
John Newman
Ben Nicholson
Wally Reinhardt
Nigel Rolfe
Susan Rothenberg
David Shapiro
Steven Sorman
Robert Stackhouse
Frank Stella
Stephen Talasnik
Claire Van Vliet
Terry Winters

BY APPOINTMENT
PHONE: 215, 732.7787 FAX: 215, 790.1866

ANNE LLOYD *New Works*



"Sprog Window" 1991, oil on canvas, 40" × 50"

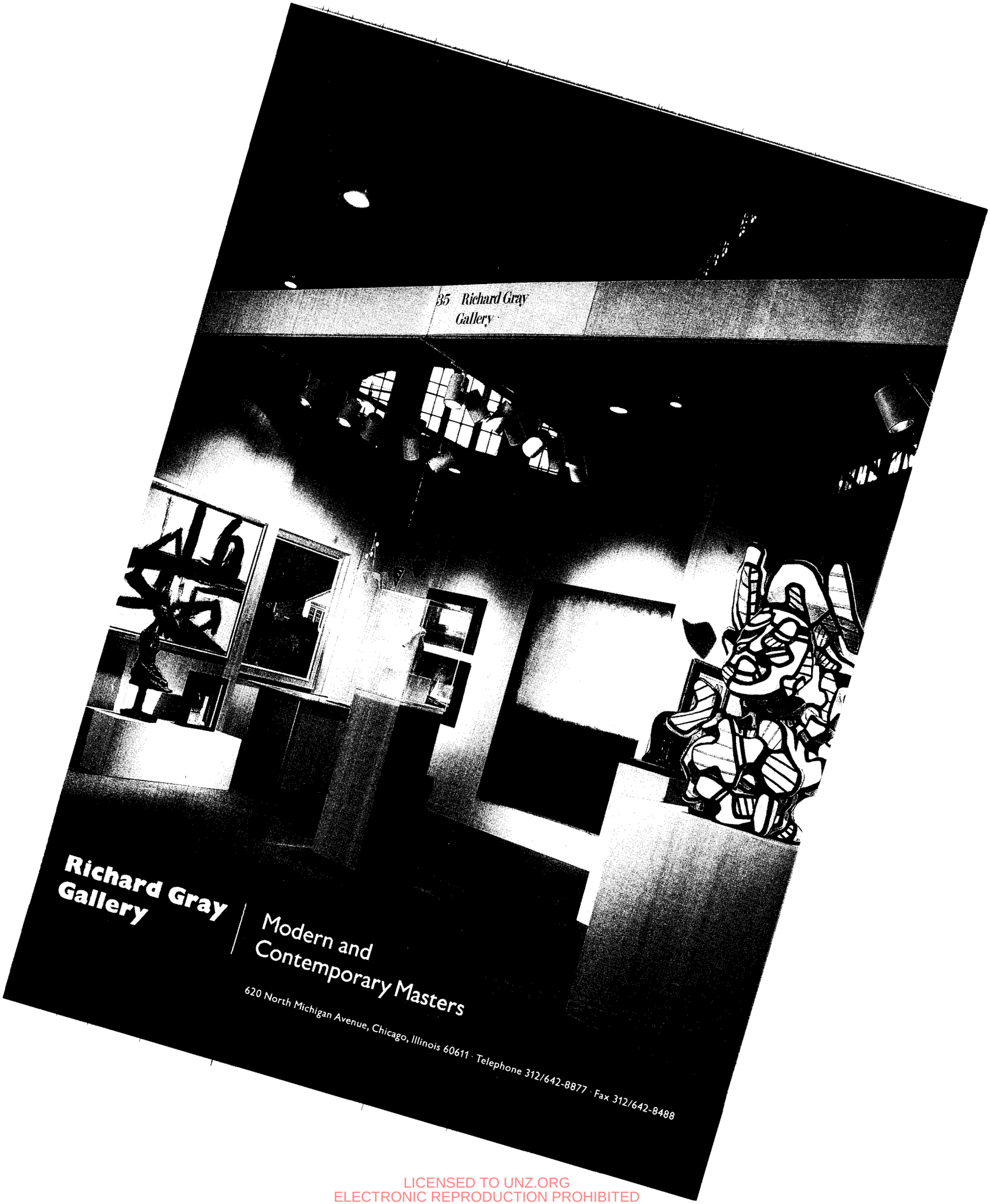
September 5–28, 1991

concurrent with

The Chrysler Museum
Norfolk, VA

KATHARINA RICH PERLOW GALLERY
Contemporary Paintings & Sculpture
560 Broadway, New York, NY 10012 • 212/941-1220

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED


35 Richard Gray Gallery
Richard Gray Gallery
Modern and Contemporary Masters
620 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60611 · Telephone 312/642-8877 · Fax 312/642-8488

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Alan Feltus
"Italy"
New Paintings

September 19 through October 26, 1991

FORUM GALLERY
1018 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10021
212-772-7666

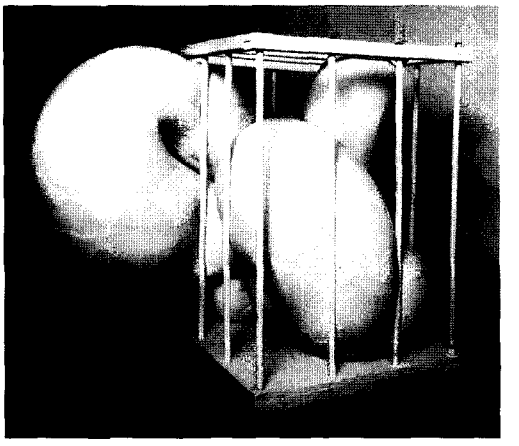
Congratulations on your 10th anniversary

BABCOCK
Galleries
Established 1852

724 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10019 212 767-1852

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Peter Agostini



"CAGE I" 1965, 3' × 4', PLASTER, IRON, WOOD

and Friends:

Elaine de Kooning **Conrad Marca-Relli**
Franz Kline **Philip Pavia**

September 10 — October 26, 1991

Gallery Hours: Tuesday-Saturday, 11:00-6:00 pm

BOB BLACKBURN's

Print Collection

Bob Blackburn

Stephan	Antonakos	Maren	Hassinger
Will	Barnet	Ted	Kurahara
Nell	Blaine	Al	Loving
Herman	Cherry	Leo	Manso
Melvin	Edwards	Lucio	Pozzi
Christos	Gianakos	Betye	Saar
Grace	Hartigan	Michelle	Stuart
Burt	Hasen	Joan	Vennum

September 10 — October 26, 1991

(Gallery II)

Gallery Hours: Tuesday-Saturday, 11:00-6:00 pm

ANITA SHAPOLSKY GALLERY

99 SPRING STREET NEW YORK, NY 10012 212-334-9755

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bernard chaet

september 11

through

october 12

marilyn pearl gallery

420 west broadway
new york ny 10012
212 966 5506
fax 226 5157

FISCHBACH GALLERY

SEPTEMBER — JOHN BUTTON'S *New York*

OCTOBER — ALICE DALTON BROWN *Pastels*
PETER LOFTUS *Recent Paintings*

NOVEMBER — JANE WILSON *Recent Paintings and Watercolors*

24 WEST 57 STREET NEW YORK 10019 212.759.2345

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ALEX KATZ

Forthcoming Exhibition
October 1991

Marlborough

40 West 57 Street New York 10019 Telephone (212) 541-4900

Congratulations to THE NEW CRITERION

KG

KRAUSHAAR GALLERIES

MARGUERITE ZORACH *Cubism and Beyond* Oct 5-Nov 2

THE PRINT SHOW, Oct 31-Nov 3
International Fine Print Dealers Association
The Armory—Park Avenue at 67th Street

LINDA SOKOLOWSKI, Nov 9-Dec 7
Oils • Collages • Monotypes

724 FIFTH AVENUE NEW YORK (212) 307-5730

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Art Students League of New York

215 W. 57th Street, N.Y.C. 10019
(212) Circle 7-4510

Founded 1875 — R.A. Florio, Executive Director

The 117th Regular Session begins September 3 and continues to May 23rd, 1992. Morning, Afternoon and Evening classes.

One-evening-a-week classes. Saturday classes for children and adults.

Special Sunday classes and Sunday lectures on Art Materials and Techniques.

Drawing, Painting, Sculpture, Graphics. Cross-section of styles represented on staff of well-known artist instructors.

Evening lectures during regular session on Art History, Portraiture, Anatomical Drawing, etc.

Exhibitions in the gallery. Student exhibitions.

Write or telephone the League for free catalogue listing all schedules through May, 1992.

Congratulations
from

THE NEW YORK OBSERVER

The Nation

and

THE LITCHFIELD COUNTY TIMES

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

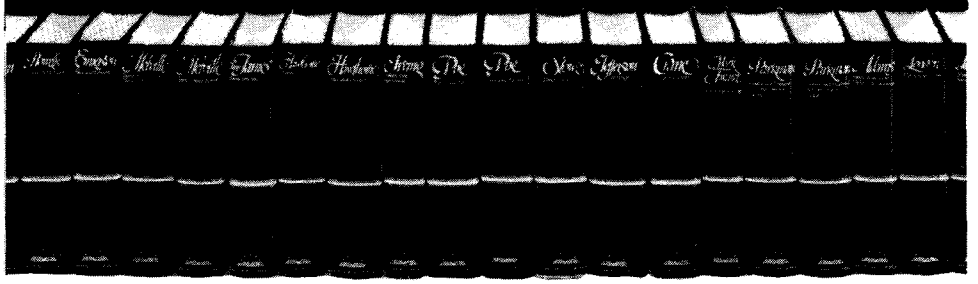
Witness to the vanishing West

In 1846, young Francis Parkman rode west to see the frontier firsthand, and to experience the tribal life of the unconquered Sioux. The result was a classic American memoir, *The Oregon Trail.* A new volume in The Library of America combines this most popular of Parkman's works with *The Conspiracy of Pontiac,* his powerful account of the tragic Indian uprising of the 1760s, first of the historical narratives that were to establish his reputation as America's greatest narrative historian.

Also available:
France and England in North America
Volumes I and II

Parkman

The Oregon Trail
The Conspiracy of Pontiac



THE LIBRARY OF AMERICA

America's best writers deserve America's best editions

More than 50 volumes now available at better bookstores. To order, or for more information, call (212) 308-3360. Distributed by Penguin USA. Write for free catalog: The Library of America, 14 E. 60 St., NY, NY 10022

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

WASHBURN GALLERY

41 East 57th Street New York 10022
(212) 753-0546 Fax (212) 935-7697

The New Criterion
850 Seventh Avenue
Suite 503
New York NY 10019

Second Class Postage
Paid at New York, NY
and at additional
Mailing Offices

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED